

MISSIONARY COUPLES AND THE EMPTY NEST EXPERIENCE

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## ABSTRACT

The author will endeavor to express his understanding of the principal biblical, theological, and psychological aspects of the family and of marriage and family counseling, emphasizing ministry to missionary couples who are experiencing the empty nest phase of life. Although recognizing that any effective therapy offered to families must be characterized by an eclectic approach, special emphasis will be given to Bowenian and structural family therapy. Structural family therapy will offer the primary model applicable to the context of missionary families. The author understands marriage and family to encapsulate true covenant and expresses his understanding of the theology of marriage and family from this starting point. From creation onward, aspects and characterizations of this covenant will be examined. Three case studies, which comprise the investigative portion of this thesis, provide examples of specific needs expressed by missionary couples experiencing the empty nest phase. Accordingly, a response plan is outlined that would attempt to provide integrated resources for these families.

## CHAPTER 1

### THE PROBLEM AND ITS SETTING

#### **The Empty Nest Defined**

There is nothing that tests the strength of a family as severely as transition. Even families who pride themselves in their passion for adventure find that times of significant change produce a certain vulnerability that can challenge the very fabric of the various relationships represented in the family unit.

One of the most significant transitions that take place within the family context occurs both during and following the period of time when the children leave home and begin life on their own. Metaphorically, this is referred to as the empty nest. Santrock (2002) writes:

An important event in a family is the launching of a child into adult life, to a career or family independent of the family of origin. Parents face new adjustments as disequilibrium is created by a child's absence. In the empty nest syndrome, *marital satisfaction decreases because parents derive considerable satisfaction from their children and the children's departure leaves parents with empty feelings.* (p. 515)

Santrock draws an important distinction between the empty nest experience and the syndrome, which he would attribute to an excess emotional investment into the life of the children, on the part of one or both parents, resulting in the life of the parent(s) being lived vicariously through the children. The result is a lack of personal identity on the part of the parents.

Opinions differ greatly as to how significant the empty nest experience is, overall.

William Coleman (1994), author of the popular guide, *Full House to Empty Nest*, writes that forty percent of married couples consult a divorce attorney during the process of the empty nest.

## **Factors to Be Considered**

### **Family Closeness**

Families vary greatly with regard to closeness. Communication styles play a significant role in determining that emotional proximity. Both quantitative and qualitative aspects of interaction between family members serve to define their structure.

From the standpoint of family systems, much has been written that addresses the aspect of closeness. Two theoreticians have made a significant contribution that, in a sense, served as a foundation for many who have followed. In order to understand the nature of the empty nest syndrome, it is important to address the primary points of each theory, as it relates to family closeness.

**Murray Bowen.** Perhaps more than any other, Bowenian systems theory is viewed as the fundamental family systems theory; therefore, its prominence cannot be overstated. Although there are several important components that comprise Bowen's theory, the following three concepts play a key part in the dissection and understanding of the concept of the empty nest syndrome.

**Differentiation.** No concept is more central to Bowenian theory than that of differentiation. The concept has been precisely defined as "the lifelong process of striving to keep one's being in balance through the reciprocal external and internal processes of self-definition and self-regulation" (Friedman, 1991, p. 140).

Differentiation means the capacity to become oneself out of one's self with minimum reactivity to the positions or reactivity of others. Differentiation is charting one's own way by means of one's own internal guidance system, rather than perpetually eyeing the "scope" to see where others are at. (Friedman, 1991 p. 141)

Considering the nature of the empty nest syndrome, the concept of differentiation plays a key part in the lives of both children and parents. In fact, the process of empty nest will both reveal and test the level of differentiation in the lives of both.

Unlike the concepts of individuation, autonomy, and independence, differentiation has more to do with the emotional being than with behavior. It recognizes the importance of one's becoming healthy in self while maintaining ties to a community. In as much, differentiation is a truly positive concept, concentrating on personal responsibility to embrace one's differences and the ability of the individual to rise above surrounding relationships, resulting in greater emotional health.

***Fusion.*** If differentiation is the ideal to which a healthy family should strive, fusion is the emotional state to be avoided. Bowen described some families as being "undifferentiated ego family masses" (Nichols & Schwartz, 2007, p. 84). Bowen (1992) wrote of his observations of a clinical research project that took place in 1956:

This "fusion of selfs" could involve every area of ego functioning. One ego could function for that of another. One family member could become physically ill in response to emotional stress in another family member. Emotional conflict between two family members could disappear with the simultaneous development of conflict between two other family members. (p. 105)

The fused family is composed of members who are unaware of where they end and other members begin. Boundaries are diffused and individual differentiation is unrealized. Unfortunately, many families never reach an adequate functionality due to the presence of fusion within the family unit. Relationships are anxiety-based, and characterized by attempts by one or more family members to control the others.

**Triangulation.** When, within a family system, two people are unable to communicate effectively and a third person is brought into the system as an intermediary a triangle has been formed. If the third person becomes a permanent fixture in the relationship triangulation has taken place. Although this may happen at a semi-conscious or subconscious level, it becomes a very integral part of the system. The third person may be used to eliminate the need for direct communication between the other two people involved. At times, the third person serves as a buffer. Especially pertinent to the issue of the empty nest syndrome, triangulation can frequently result in a child becoming the third person, either serving as a buffer or as a mediator between the two parents. Children have also been described as insulators, eliminating the need for their father and mother to communicate directly. Nichols and Schwartz (2007) write:

A wife upset with her husband's distance may increase her involvement with one of the children. What makes this a triangle is diverting energy that might otherwise go into the marriage. The wife's spending time with her daughter may take pressure off her husband to do the things he doesn't care to. However, it also decreases the likelihood that husband and wife will develop interests they can share—and it undermines the daughter's independence. (p. 84)



It is probable that, of the three Bowenian concepts addressed here, triangulation is the most pertinent to the empty nest experience. It is obvious that the dynamics that play into this maladaptive solution will greatly affect the transitional process that takes place during the empty nest.

Although Bowenian theory includes several other basic concepts, differentiation, fusion, and triangulation are fundamental to the issue at hand. Basic to his hypothesis is the idea that emotional distance, avoiding extremes, determines emotional health. Differentiation is about the integrity of the individual members of the family. When it is difficult to determine where one family member ends and another begins, the integrity of each person is diminished. Triangulation is about the failure of two family members to relate in a healthy way. When relationships are marred, life's transitions tend to intensify.

Generally, the dysfunction that is part and parcel of fused family units becomes more evident during times of transition. An example would be the case of a family whose members have all attended the same church for two generations. In an effort to explore other avenues of religious expression, a college age member of the family decides to visit other congregations and is delighted to find a church that holds similar doctrinal views but also has a college age ministry, which her home church doesn't have. While a healthy family that strives for differentiation of family members would probably honor the decision of the college student to attend another congregation, a family characterized by fusion would not. The decision would be interpreted as a threat to the family unity at best, and at worst, betrayal. This student's transition from adolescence to adulthood provided the necessary transition to test his family of origin.

**Salvador Minuchin.** Structural family therapy, like it's Bowenian counterpart, gives more attention to the here and now than to family history. Also, similar to other family systems theorists, Minuchin believes in constructed realities. Distinctive to the structural theory is the attention that is given to "diverse points of entry" (Colapinto, 1991, p. 421) afforded the therapist by different families and the definition of therapy as "a realignment of the family's structure of transactions" (Colapinto, p. 421).

Through early research, Minuchin observed that the families of psychosomatic children were excessively organized and stable. His intervention included a "destructuring" of the rigid organization and a restructuring of the family, which allowed for the establishment of "more functional parameters: clearer boundaries, increased flexibility in transactions, conflict negotiation, and detriangulation of the identified patient (Colapinto, 1991, p. 420).

As important as Minuchin's emphasis on family structures may be, the principal difference between structural family therapy and Bowenian family systems therapy is Minuchin's idea of interdependence. The concept is defined in the following statement:

The tendency of many therapists to regard "strong boundaries" as an absolute positive from the point of view of the differentiation of the individual is the expression of a cultural bias that extols the virtues of independence and privacy. Structural family therapy adopts in this respect the "countercultural" position that individual differentiation is achieved through multiple dependency—through participation in multiple subsystems, beginning with the family's. What to some other therapists looks like mastery of autonomy, to the structuralist may look like isolation. (Colapinto, 1991, p. 423)

The importance of the distinction described above cannot be overstated, with respect to Christian families in general and missionary families in particular. Although the theories of both Bowen and Minuchin each champions certain strengths, as a missionary and student of Latino culture, this writer strongly identifies with Salvador Minuchin's structural family therapy. Minuchin's theory of interdependence, which is the premise upon which he builds his style of therapy, extols virtues with which non-westerners can identify. In addition, this writer recognizes that his own family of origin as well as current family context can identify with Minuchin's concepts and can confirm that a thorough understanding of the structurally sound family can make a profound difference in one's family experience.

The Bowenian concept of fusion and Minuchin's counterpart idea of enmeshment both address the issue of inadequate distance between family members. Minuchin's structural family therapy, however, tends to deal in a much more thorough way with the problem of disengagement in family systems—when there is too much emotional distance between members. The presence of either of these extreme conditions will significantly affect the way in which families deal with transition, specifically the empty nest.

The goal of family health, according to structural family therapy, involves an “interweaving of connectedness and differentiation” (Colapinto, 1991, p. 434). Minuchin gives great emphasis to the importance of complementarity and reciprocity while maintaining the integrity of the individual.

## **Ethnicity**

Ethnicity plays a significant role in the transition of the empty nest; in fact the very standard of “normality” is defined, primarily, by one’s ethnicity. It can hardly be coincidental that Salvador Minuchin, born and raised in Argentina, developed a family systems theory that placed an emphasis on family members gleaned from one another, rather than simply striving for individuation. In most non-western cultures, the contribution of the family to the development of individuals is given significant importance. It is not unusual for unmarried children to remain with their parents until forming their own family, even if they are approaching middle age when that takes place. In fact, it would be unusual for them to disengage from the family household prior to that event.

Once the marriage takes place, it is not generally expected that a child will disengage from the family of origin in order to form his or her own family. Instead, one is generally expected to incorporate the new family into the family of origin. The integrity of the “new” family is honored within the very context of the extended family, even in situations where bride and groom move into the home of either of their parents.

Consequently, families who come from an ethnic background that strongly values the continuity of family practices will deal with the empty nest in a distinct way. It’s important to realize that cultural practices do not define health.

An example of the above would be the comparison of the way in which an Italian American family handles the empty nest as opposed to one of German roots. Although the two countries of origin share a common border, their ethnicity is quite distinct. The Italian American family might be given to more emotional demonstration during the

transition while the German American family may be more prone to intellectualizing the experience. Neither family should necessarily be seen as handling the experience in a healthier way than the other. Although each will cope with the event differently, neither experience can be defined as healthy or unhealthy outside of the scope of the respective ethnicity.

As has been noted, the concepts addressed above have a significant bearing on the dynamics experienced by families going through the empty nest. Those families whose interactions have not been healthy would be expected to have more difficulty going through this major transition.

Some families that are observed to be “very close” are assumed to be healthy on that basis alone. Unfortunately, closeness is only one factor, and, as Bowen has noted, if there is not ample distance between family members to provide for adequate differentiation of those individuals, the system is not healthy. These fused families will certainly undergo tremendous pain, and perhaps crisis, as they go through the empty nest transition. Maladaptive triangles that have been formed may no longer survive, due to the geographic distance between members or may continue through long distance. Attempts to revive the triangle can result in further disruption. An example would be the mother who has triangulated with a daughter in order to avoid her husband. After multiplied attempts, the mother finally persuades her daughter that it would be better if she would return home from the out of state university and attend a local college. The daughter returns home but, having tasted of freedom, the relationship between her and her mother is not the same and she is no longer willing to serve as the mediator between father and mother.

## **Lack of Preparation**

Although children entering college may be adequately prepared, parents often do not take the time to plan for their own lives once the students have gone. Parents who fail to plan for their new life are frequently taken by surprise and suffer a greater emotional impact than those who have taken the time to envision what life might look like without the kids. The envisioning normally includes concrete plans and goals surrounding activities that would have been impossible to realize while the children were at home. The issue of the need for preparation will be revisited, more at length, in the following section.

## **The Missionary Family and the Empty Nest**

The missionary family is, to a degree, a product of a hybrid culture, with roots found in the culture of origin and the host culture where ministry has taken place. While most of the missionary family's time is spent within the context of the host culture, the ties to the culture of origin are normally not severed. Even so, the way in which missionary families function can frequently reflect their host culture to a greater degree than their ancestral home. Although this fact alone may not be problematic, it may present a challenge for extended family and friends from the culture of origin to comprehend. For that reason alone, the missionary family can feel even more lonely and isolated when surrounded by an ambivalent circle of peers in their home culture.

While serving as an area director for a denominational missions sending agency, this author observed that approximately 60 percent of the missionary couples that left his respective field, not returning to another foreign field, did so during the empty nest

transition. Most, if not all, of those couples were going through a crisis due to the separation or pending separation from their children. Consequently, they came to the conclusion that the only way to adequately resolve the issue was to leave the field. This should not come as a surprise, considering the fact that aside from normal retirement, the primary reason cited for missionaries leaving the field is their children (Elkins, 1997).

Missionary couples frequently go through crisis during the empty nest transition. The crisis can instigate depression, physical symptomology, extreme conflict with missionary and national coworkers, and serious marital discord that can sometimes end in divorce.

### **Why the Crisis?**

**Missionary families tend to be close knitted.** Closeness isn't a problem, in itself, however, the closeness that missionary families share can certainly intensify the feelings of absence due to the children having left home. The fact that missionary families have unusually close ties can be contributed to two primary factors: relative isolation from extended family and friends and the influence of the host culture.

***The isolation factor.*** Mccaig (1994) writes:

A unique characteristic of the global-nomad family is the high degree of interdependence of family members. Because the nuclear family is the only consistent social unit through all moves, family members are psychologically thrown back on one another in a way that is not typical in geographically stable families. Close family bonds are common. Siblings and parents may become each other's best friends. Patterns formed overseas fly in the face of conventional theory about when children leave home, emotionally and physically. (p. 36)

The “interdependence” that McCaig mentions can serve missionary families well if those families are functioning healthily. If, however, there is a significant level of dysfunction taking place, the “closeness” can become counterproductive:

The strength of this family bond works to the benefit of children when parent-child communication is good and the overall family dynamic is healthy. It can be devastating when it is not. Compared to the geographically stable child, the global-nomad child is inordinately reliant on the nuclear family for affirmation, behavior-modeling, support and above all, a place of safety. The impact, therefore, of dysfunction in this most basic of units is exacerbated by the mobile lifestyle. (McCaig, 1994, p. 36)

Although more attention will be given to the subject, it is necessary to point out that failure of the missionary parents to adjust to the absence of the children can activate a cycle resulting in maladjustment for the college missionary kid, which in turn intensifies the parent’s crisis and so on. Just as these family members have fed off one another in a positive way (interdependence) they are now fostering dysfunction in one another as their behavior becomes more characterized by anxiety.

The truth is that, for missionary couples, the empty nest is one of the major transitional periods during their career and is exacerbated by the geographic distance that characterizes the separation. Although e-mailing, Skype, and inexpensive long distance international calling services have created a different world compared to the one that missionaries knew decades ago, parents still realize that they are hours, sometimes days of travel away from their child. Many live in fear of how they would handle an emergency situation, should it arise.



*Cultural influences.* Characteristically, missionary families spend more time with people from their host culture than do their expatriate counterparts. During the 20 years that this author lived in Latin America, he became familiar with many American couples who were living abroad, either involved in business or with the government. It was evident that many of the wives spent little to no time with people from their host country, discounting the contact they had with household employees (maids, drivers, etc.) By contrast, most of the missionary wives formed strong relationships with Latina women.

Although there has been an increase of emphasis given to mentoring programs in recent years, it is not uncommon for a young missionary family to be placed in a region where the sending agency has no other workers. Even when other members of the mission are present, most missionaries spend much of their time interacting with those from the host culture.

As cultural adaptation takes place, new ways of resolving issues and relating to friends and family may replace what was once considered normal. The more the missionary parents and children learn to relate and adapt, the more likely they are to incorporate the values of the host country into their own family dynamic. Therefore, a gentle metamorphosis takes place that may not be noticeable to the family itself, but will be particularly evident to extended family and friends from the culture of origin.

Most world missionaries serve in nonwestern nations. Generally, family cohesiveness is valued more in those countries than in the western countries of origin. What might appear to be “fusion” or “enmeshment” to the American could easily be seen as healthy and normal in the nonwestern host cultures. Missionaries serving in these countries will, to some degree, begin to reflect the new normality. At best, an emphasis

on individualism will be replaced by an affinity for the interdependence being modeled by families around them. Taken to the extreme, and much less desirable, would be the tendency to undervalue the integrity of individual members of the family, hence becoming what Minuchin would refer to as an enmeshed family unit (Colapinto, 1991). It is the opinion of this author that it is not uncommon for missionary families to become deeply enmeshed. When this occurs the family dynamic becomes more reactionary than proactive and is fueled by anxiety on the part of one or more family members.

What has been described above is not uncommon among missionary families due to the fact that it is so commonplace among nonwestern families. It is a thin line that separates healthy interdependence from dysfunctional enmeshment. Transitional periods, such as the onset of the empty nest, can accentuate the negative, causing a family that is teetering between interdependence and enmeshment to “cross over.”

**Missionary parents can sometimes lack healthy coping skills.** Because all missionaries are humans, it may be that they also sometimes lack adequate coping skills. If missionary parents are not given to healthy processing they will likely look for an easy escape from the natural grieving process that accompanies the empty nest period.

***The need to grieve.*** Due to expectations, whether imposed or imagined, missionary parents may feel embarrassed at the thought of experiencing grief during the empty nest phase and “bury” the hurt and loss. Although denial is a natural part of the grieving process, it should only serve a temporary purpose, and should not stall the process. Healthy denial is “usually a temporary defense and will soon be replaced by partial acceptance (Kübler-Ross, 1969, p. 53).

The departure of the missionary children dictates a meaningful grieving process that will reflect the parents' personalities, ethnicities, and spiritual values. The grief cannot be placed into a mold that is deemed "acceptable" by colleagues, but rather, will be unique to each situation. Unfortunately, some couples may be ashamed of the abundance of tears that have been shed as a result of the absence of their children while other couples feel guilty because they are genuinely excited about the opportunity to enter this new phase of life and, comparatively speaking, have experienced little emotional demonstration. It's important that parents understand that there is no right or wrong way in which to grieve, however, effective grief will assist the missionary couple in transitioning through the empty nest period.

***Diverting energy and resources.*** Once the last child has left home missionary parents frequently experience a lack of purpose. Although this experience is not unique to missionary parents, it can be more pronounced, depending on the family dynamics present.

It has been the observation of this writer that some missionaries seem to feel incompetent and ineffective in their ministry role so they compensate by overinvesting into the lives of their children. In truth, the children can provide an excuse for not participating in ministry. Once the children are no longer present, parents are left with little or no activity that demands their passion. They have lived the preceding years vicariously, through their children and have formed no life of their own.

Even in situations where missionary parents have had a satisfactory ministry, given they have set appropriate boundaries with that ministry, they have also made a significant investment of time and energy into their children. In those cases, it's not

uncommon for the missionary couple to feel a relational void once their children are gone, and begin to supplant those emotional resources into the lives of young people on the field. Such was the case in one of the case studies referenced in chapter four.

Other activities may provide a healthy diversion for the missionary couple, given they are not incorporated in such a way that father and mother use them to “run away” from the fact that the children are no longer with them. Both husband and wife can devote time to the ministry that was not available while the children were at home. Although this may already be customary for the husband, a wife, who stayed home with her children, may be unaccustomed to ministry involvement outside the home, so this may not be a natural response for her.

If the missionary husband has been extremely overinvested in the ministry while the wife has been living vicariously through the children, the empty nest period presents a time of grave challenge for their relationship. In a scenario such as this, one possibility is that the missionary mother has triangulated with one of the children, thus broadening the communication gap between her and her husband.

**Lack of preparation.** Having mentioned this as a contributing factor towards the empty nest syndrome within the general population, within the missionary family, there are additional factors that cause lack of preparation to be even more significant.

One of the most significant concerns for missionary parents is the adaptation of their children upon returning to the U.S. Not only do missionary parents anticipate furlough with fear and trepidation, they live in dread of what might happen if their children fail to adjust to life in the U.S. when they return as young adults. Consequently,

parents frequently do everything within their power to assist their children in the transition.

While some parents plan for the children's transitions, this author has observed that they plan little for their own. In fact, all too frequently, due to the tremendous amount of attention given to preparing the children, little thought is given to what life will look like once the children are gone. Missionary parents often find their children having adjusted well while they are floundering. It's then that they realize that they should have been more intentional with respect to what their personal lives would look like once the children left. Chapter five will include aspects of healthy planning for missionary couples soon to become empty nesters.

The following chapter will look at the biblical and theological basis for marriage and family. It is the desire of this author to present a theological foundation for family that will be pertinent to the issue at hand.

## CHAPTER 2

### A THEOLOGY OF THE FAMILY

The dawn of the twenty-first century has brought change to everyday life in ways too numerous to mention. Family life has not enjoyed immunity to the revolutionary societal modifications that have taken place. The nuclear family is defined according to the context and preferences of those from within. In society at large, little thought is given to defining family in light of theological constructs. For followers of Christ, it becomes all the more imperative that an understanding of the family be developed—an understanding that, while challenging traditionally sanctioned errors, is scripturally sound and provides a model that Christian families can seek to replicate.

#### **Relationship as a Reflection of God**

Barth (1994) said:

Because man is not merely a creature, but the knowledge derived from the reality of Jesus Christ shows that he is designed by God to be a covenant-partner and exists and can exist as man only in this covenant-relationship, real man is never solitary but is always man in relation, confronted by another for whom he exists, namely God and the fellow-man. To be a fellow man is the decisive determination of the nature of man. (p. 194)

It is clear from the Genesis account of creation that the idea of marriage and family originated in the heart of God and was not an end unto itself but the result of an innate necessity placed in the heart of man by God. When the Lord said, “It is not good for the man to be alone” (Genesis 2:18 All Scripture references are from the New

American Standard Version), this was not the expression of a surprised God who, as an afterthought, decided that Adam would need help in the garden. Rather, it was the proclamation of a relational God who had created man in His own image:

Family relationships, whether parent/child, husband/wife, brother/sister or any other special bonding relationship, are reflections of the covenant relationships that exist within the Godhead and are reflected in the relationship between God and humankind and between human persons as they are created “in the image of God.” This “image” reflects the nature of the persons as well as their relationship. (Anderson & Guernsey, 1985, p. 47)

Mathews and Hubbard (2004), bring further clarity to the idea that family is a reflection of who God is:

What was God thinking about? Actually, rightly understood, he was thinking about himself. What God *did* in creating marriage grew out of who God *is*. And who God *is* is a profoundly relational Trinity: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, existing in an eternal dance (Greek: *perichoresis*) of love. (p. 175)

Humanity, therefore, best lives up to being made in God’s image by living in relationship—both with God and others. Ironically, he or she cannot rightly live in relationship with God without living in community with each other, nor can he or she fully live in relationship with other human beings without having relationship with God.

That family reflects aspects of covenant is a gross understatement. Family *is* covenant, and apart from that realization no true biblical understanding of family can take place. True family, at its best, is but a reflection of the relationship within the Godhead,

and, consequently, the relationship established between God and man. Barth (1969) would define covenant as:

being the fundamental order of God's relation to creation . . . we are not to view creation as having its own natural telos, with the covenant acting as a remedial institution because the creature has failed to live by this natural law. Rather, covenant itself is the inner and eternal presupposition of creation, while creation is the extended and temporal manifestation of covenant. (p. 97)

Theologically, *covenant* refers to "the unilateral relation established by God with his people Israel, through specific actions by which he summoned individuals and finally an entire nation into a history of response" (Anderson & Guernsey, 1985, p. 33). The Abrahamic covenant was unconditionally based on God's promise to Abraham to make of him a great nation. Abraham could not gain favor with God to further enhance the covenant, nor could he annul the covenant by his disobedience.

Relationship is central to any biblical covenant. Hugenberger (1994) says:

Also supportive of the centrality of relationship in covenant is the frequency with which familial or social relationships appear to provide a model for the obligations of a covenant and, consequently, for the terminology by which reference is made to the partners of a covenant. (p. 177)

### **Purpose of the Marriage and Family Covenant**

A traditional misunderstanding has existed within the church with respect to God's purpose in establishing marriage and family. Adam's need for a helper is recognized by many as God's reason for sending Eve. Many others would look to the



need for procreation as the motive. It is clear, however, that neither of these is the primary reason that God establishes the marriage and family covenant:

The “for this reason” in the Genesis text rests solidly on the *relational* imperative that led to Eve’s creation. God did *not* say, “Adam has too much work to do. Let’s send help.” God did *not* say, “Adam is the important First Man of humanity. Let’s send someone to cook and clean for him.” God did *not* say, “Adam needs help in making babies.” What God *did* say was, “Adam is alone. That aloneness is not good. Let’s make someone like him so that he will be alone no longer.” And it is to connection, not procreation, that Jesus pointed in his confrontation with the Pharisees: “Haven’t you read . . . ‘for this reason . . . a man will . . . be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh’? So they are no longer two, but one. Therefore what God has joined together, let man not separate. (Mathews & Hubbard, 2004, p. 177)

Andrews University scholar Richard Davidson (1988) comments, “It may be noted that God created the bipolarity of the sexes from the beginning. The popular idea of an ideal androgynous being later split into two sexes cannot be sustained from the text” (p. 7).

The intentionality with which God created man and woman, different but equal, speaks to two aspects of His personhood. As is evidenced by all of creation, He is a God of variety and receives glory from the diversity of his handiwork. Second, He is a just God, not giving preference to one sex or the other. Paul made this clear: “There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free man, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus” (Galatians 3:28).

## Aspects of the Covenant

**The covenant is sacred.** Anderson and Guernsey (1985) refer to this aspect of covenant as “supranatural” and explain:

Something is called “supranatural,” of course, only if there is no natural law or principle that demands it or that accounts for it—it has no existence in nature as either principle or prototype. The prototype for this relationship between man and woman is the relation that God himself has with his people. It is a covenant partnership that only subsequently is revealed to be a “sign” of the covenant relationship that Yahweh has with Israel, and that Christ has with the church. (pp. 30-31)

***Sacredness within the marriage relationship.*** As part of the divine command to Adam, the Lord stated that the marriage covenant would entail the man’s breaking away from his family of origin and committing himself to his wife: “For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh” (Matthew 19:5).

The “breaking away” does not sever ties and responsibilities with the family of origin but places them within a distinct context:

It is quite possible that many marriages fail because of improper “separation” as well as because of inadequate union. Relationship to parents and responsibility for their welfare are not severed by marriage, but they must be considered in a new light. The marriage bond is to be the strongest of all human ties. No human relationship is to have priority over the marriage relationship. In this sense marriage is separation from all other relationships. (Scudder, 1962, p. 23)

Scudder places the marriage covenant in an arena of its own. The command to “leave and cleave” is realized in marriage when a spouse gives the highest of human priorities to the marriage covenant, understanding the uniqueness of that relationship. The proper prioritizing, however, does not imply neglecting the family of origin. This would also be considered an “improper separation” and would violate scriptural instruction to care for one’s extended family (1 Timothy 5:4-8). According to the cited text, Paul places those who turn their back on family to be “worse than unbelievers.” This would certainly apply to responsibility for parents.

The sacredness of the “oneness” within the marriage relationship is realized fully in the sexual union of husband and wife. Man and woman, giving themselves over fully and completely to one another in a physical sense, not only satisfy the longing for closeness that is innate within the human self but also represent and ratify the holy covenant made between the two of them.

In any case, in support of this identification of sexual union, it was recalled how oath-signs, such as eating together or giving one’s hand in a hand shake, often function by offering a solemn depiction of the covenant commitment to unity being undertaken. With respect to sexual union, it is clear that this act is ideally suited to depict the “one flesh” reality which is definitional of marriage in Gen. 2:24. (Hugenberger, 1994, p. 279)

That sexuality was part of the original plan of God for humanity ought to be good news for the believer. It is unfortunate that, there has been a tendency within certain segments of the evangelical movement to view sexuality as a necessary evil; a

component of the fallen nature of man. Before sexuality can be embraced and celebrated, it must be seen as an integral part of God's design for his most cherished creation.

The apostle Paul, in his letter to the Corinthians, writes, "The husband must fulfill his duty to his wife, and likewise also the wife to her husband. The wife does not have authority over her own body, but the husband *does*; and likewise also the husband does not have authority over his own body, but the wife *does*." (1 Corinthians 7:4)

Paul indicates that sexual activity is for mutual fulfillment. Both husband and wife are to fully enjoy one another, and neither should be deprived of that enjoyment. In his commentary on Corinthians, William Barclay (1975) indicates that the sexual picture is a representation of marriage as a whole:

Paul declares a supremely great principle. Marriage is a partnership. The husband cannot act independently of the wife, nor the wife of the husband. They must always act together. The husband must never regard the wife simply as a means of self-gratification. The whole marriage relationship, both in its physical and spiritual sides, is something in which both are to find their gratification and the highest satisfaction of all their desires. (p. 60)

The covenant established between husband and wife is also a characterization of God's covenant with humanity, first presented within the context of the Abrahamic covenant and fully realized through the giving of His Son, Jesus Christ, and the relationship established with humanity as a result of that gift. Paul refers to this in Ephesians 5:25: "Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ also loved the church and gave Himself up for her."

Unfortunately, the sacred aspect of the marriage covenant is lost on many couples who assume that God wants to be a part of “their” covenant, rather than understanding that both the God-human covenant and the husband-wife covenant are born in the heart of God. Understanding that important feature of covenant enables us to better comprehend God’s plan for couples. Mathews and Hubbard (2004) write:

Understanding marriage from God’s point of view rests on an understanding of this, God’s awesome invitation to all people: “Come, be with me. Be in my story, be my people in my story, in a relationship that will not end.” But people come, to borrow from Tolkien’s imagery, asking God to come to their personal tea party and make it wonderful. . . . Although people are reluctant to admit this, they would much rather have God at the center of their story than have their story revolve around God and his goals. (pp. 165-166)

***Sacredness within the family relationship.*** The characteristics of the parent-child covenant relationship reflect, to a great degree, those of the covenant between husband and wife. On the part of the parents, it is typified by a sacrificial love that seeks to tenderly nurture and rear the children. Explaining Paul’s exhortation to parents found in Ephesians 6:4, Scudder (1962) writes:

The term translated “bring them up” or “care for them” or “nurture them” is an imperative and it describes the whole process of rearing a child from infancy to maturity. The word translated “discipline” or “chastening” includes the idea of instruction as well as chastisement. (p. 103)

Undoubtedly, the weight of the covenant between parents and children rests with the parents for much of their lives. This is exemplified in the story of the prodigal son.

For the reader who is rooted in contemporary western culture, a casual reading of the account might not reveal the severity of the actions of the younger son. In demanding his portion from the father, he was, in effect, saying, “I cannot wait for you to die. I don’t want you to benefit from what is rightfully coming to me.” His desire to go to “a far and distant land” betrayed his plan to disconnect from his parents, extended family, and value system. It is important to remember that this narrative is a parable. As such, Jesus takes liberty to communicate an event that would have been unheard of in the context of his audience. Bailey (2005) in his research related to this narrative, writes:

But it is and most certainly was unthinkable for any son to request his portion of the family wealth while his father was still alive. Every Middle Eastern peasant understands this instinctively. With endless village groups all across the Middle East I have tested this thesis. The answer has always been the same. (p. 41)

For those whom Bailey interviewed, the whole idea was unfathomable.

Assuredly, those who listened to Jesus would have reacted similarly. Jesus makes the point that, as ludicrous and revolting as the younger son’s actions were, the effect on the good father was not to break the covenant. He, in fact, exemplified the sacred covenant-keeping responsibility that is part and parcel of parenting—even when the children, seemingly, would like to abolish the covenant. More will be said about the example of the good father later in the chapter. This parable is extremely important in that the covenant relationship portrayed, in many ways, mirrors the relationship between God and His children, thereby providing a pattern for the parental covenant:

Human parents stand in a relation to their children in a way analogous to the way in which God is related to his people, as Father. The seniority of parents over their

children is relative, not absolute. Also, both parents, the mother and father, equally bear the responsibility of fulfilling, by analogy, that which is represented by the Fatherhood of God. (Anderson & Guernsey, 1985, p. 61)

The importance of the element of sacredness as it pertains to the marriage and family covenants cannot be overstated. Understanding that these covenants are to mirror God's relationship with his children provides both the perfect example and the objective needed to navigate through life together. Again, as parents we do not ask God to be a part of our family covenant; rather, we ask that our family enter into God's covenant plan for us.

**Love is the basis of covenant.** Anderson and Guernsey (1985) rightfully refer to Deuteronomy 7:6-8 as clarifying that the Lord's covenant with us is based on love alone:

For you are a holy people to the LORD your God; the LORD your God has chosen you to be a people for His own possession out of all the peoples who are on the face of the earth. The LORD did not set His love on you nor choose you because you were more in number than any of the peoples, for you were the fewest of all peoples, but because the LORD loved you and kept the oath which He swore to your forefathers, the LORD brought you out by a mighty hand and redeemed you from the house of slavery, from the hand of Pharaoh king of Egypt.

Barth (1958) describes the excellence of God's love demonstrated in His covenant with man:

But divine love is perfect love, the inaccessible prototype and true basis of all creaturely love, because it does not rest on a presupposition of this kind, but creates the presupposition. God loves the being which could not exist without

Him, but only does so by Him. God loves His own creature. This is the absolutely unique fear of the covenant in which His love is exercised and fulfilled. Its external basis, i.e., the existence and being of the creature with which He is covenanted, is the work of His own will and achievement. His creation is the external basis of this covenant. So firmly is this covenant established! So trustworthy is its presupposition not only on God's part but also on the part of the creature! So great is the faithfulness and constancy which it can as such expect from God in this covenant! (p. 96)

Attention should be given to Barth's usage of "expect" in the last sentence.

Human understanding struggles to embrace a covenant love so secure that one should grow to expect no less than unconditional love from Father God. Nonetheless, it is to this degree of covenant love that family must strive: an unmerited love that can be attained only through the Creator. This love is characterized by an understanding that believing and trusting are rooted in belonging (Anderson & Guernsey, 1985).

**Covenant is characterized by faithfulness.** God's covenant with His children, unlike any other covenant, is distinguished by complete faithfulness. Throughout the Old Testament, Israel is found to be lacking in faithfulness. Like the prodigal son referred to earlier, she breaks covenant with Yahweh only to find His faithfulness intact. Barth (1958) writes:

At the centre, where the question of Israel's own position and preservation arises, this alliance has been completely destroyed by Israel. But even so, in the light of its beginning and end, and therefore from the standpoint of God's decision and disposal, it cannot cease to be love and marriage. We cannot note or feel too



strongly the weight of the fact, which stands immovably in the background and is always presupposed over and over again—that Yahweh is the Husband and Israel the wife, i.e., that Yahweh is Israel’s Husband and Israel Yahweh’s wife. (p. 317)

***Faithfulness in the marriage covenant.*** Marriage ought to pattern the faithfulness exemplified by God in His covenant with His people. Jesus clearly did not give the Pharisees a free pass when they came to him questioning their right to divorce (Matthew 19:3-6). Instead, in word and in example, He epitomized the covenant-keeping pattern established by the Father when He chose the path of the cross.

The pattern of faithfulness to the bride, Yahweh being the husband and Israel the wife, is realized through Christ’s faithfulness to what is sometimes a faithless church. What does that kind of faithfulness look like in one’s marriage?

Marriage is about the commitment to be, by the Spirit’s enablement, Christ present in the life of another person. It is about faithfulness and sexual purity and embracing by faith the miracle of God’s restoration process in another person when evidence of that restoration is hard to see. *Marriage is about trying again, because God’s restoration process makes second chances common sense.* It is about believing that in the “not yet” moments of ordinary life, the “already” of the resurrection life empowers the Christian to live faithfully, to love, and to forgive. (Mathews & Hubbard, 2004, p. 200)

Covenant faithfulness in marriage can be demonstrated within the life of a spouse, in response to the faithlessness of the partner. Perhaps nothing can mirror the covenant character of God as powerfully as when a spouse responds with faithfulness to a partner who has been less than faithful, reiterating the fact that, although we live in a fallen

world, Jesus' death and subsequent resurrection speak to the possibility of rising above contemporary cultural patterns and finding restoration, even in the midst of faithlessness.

***Faithfulness in the family covenant.*** Undoubtedly, one of the greatest examples of parental covenant faithfulness is found in Luke 15. The steadfastness that characterized the attitude of the father mirrors the Lord's covenant commitment to His children. When faced with emotional disengagement, disrespect, and abandonment on the part of the son, the father still demonstrated the strength of covenant when the son returned.

Perhaps one of the best biblical illustrations of covenant faithfulness on the part of a child is found in Ruth, who was not a biological child but a daughter-in-law. The fact that covenant faithfulness is sometimes demonstrated by a willingness to exceed expectations is made evident in this text. This story is clear as to the love and commitment felt by both of Naomi's daughters-in-law; however, with obvious conviction Ruth articulates the conditions of her own covenant with Naomi: "Do not urge me to leave you or turn back from following you; for where you go, I will go, and where you lodge, I will lodge. Your people shall be my people, and your God, my God. Where you die, I will die, and there I will be buried. Thus may the LORD do to me, and worse, if anything but death parts you and me" (Ruth 1:16-17).

The ideal biblical demonstrations of covenant faithfulness within marriage and family seem to be exceptions rather than the rule. Today is no different, as it is within a context of the "already but not yet" that endeavors are made to live in covenant faithfulness:

In a real sense, as bent and broken image-bearers, we have been restored. We are already participants in the resurrection life of Jesus Christ. Yet we are members of that not yet fully realized kingdom where all will be liberated from the present bondage to decay and brought into the glorious freedom of the children of God (Romans 8:21). And marriage in the already-but-not-yet of the present age reflects both the not yet completed restoration of God's people and the reality of the already present power of Christ's resurrection life. (Mathews & Hubbard, 2004, pp. 199)

Although Mathews and Hubbard speak specifically to the marriage covenant, there is a clear application for family covenant, as well. Within the context of "this present life" both God's promises and the reality of the fallen world come into play. It is clear, however, that within the covenant paradigm, the Lord has promised supernatural resources:

The command of God by which marriage as a human, social relation is given the status of covenant partnership is a positive and rich resource of growth and renewal. What God "joins together" he attends with love and faithfulness. This is a promise and commitment of God himself to the marriage relation as a source of love, healing, and hope. (Anderson & Guernsey, 1985, p. 104)

Concerning the formation of the parent-child covenant relationship and this promise, Anderson and Guernsey (1985) write:

Central to this purpose is also the establishing of the responsibility to bring children into the world in such a way that they are bound to the "bonding" that exists between the father and the mother as the context of covenant love. (p. 96)

Therefore, it is the very covenant relationship between husband and wife that produces the parent-child relationship. Undoubtedly, this takes place in a forum of example, as children observe their own parents living out covenant and learning that covenant is an important aspect of family life. It is also important to understand that this covenant, like the marriage covenant, is the product of God's grace at work in the family. Both inspiration and empowerment to keep covenant come from a covenant honoring God.

**Covenant brings order.** Because the author of the covenant is an omniscient God, the covenant itself is characterized by order. There is a divine order for marriage and family that transcends culture and generations.

Popular evangelical notions of God's divine order for the family can sometimes consist of little more than proof texting and are not typified by exegesis. An example of this would be the teaching on family finances that surfaced in the 1980s. This author experienced teaching that propagated that the husband, as the head of the household, should control all family finances, including balancing the checkbook. This was, apparently, part of God's order for the family. This author observed that some Christian couples who had functioned well with the wife taking care of the family bookkeeping began to attempt to shift these responsibilities to the husband only to find that their prior system worked much better. In truth, the Bible does not address the issue of who should take care of the accounting responsibilities in the family.

The Bible, in fact, says less about the how to of the marriage relationships than many would imply. That which the Word of God makes clear should challenge each

member of each Christian family to the core of their being in that, again, we are to mirror God's covenant character in our own family relationships. Scudder (1962) writes:

the best way to deal with family problems is through a positive striving for the ideal. This is still the best prescription for those who are already in the midst of family trouble. Every redeemed individual has known what it means to start over again—what it means to start out after the ideal again, after having failed and having received God's forgiveness. God has established some qualifying principles, however, that clearly set bounds within which families are to strive for the ideal. (p. 130)

Although the personification of "the ideal" will vary and depend, to a degree, upon culture and family history, biblical principles that cause marriages and families to be characterized by order are easily identified. Ephesians 5 speaks of the need for marriages to demonstrate Christ-like love, respect, and submission; Ephesians 6 directs children to love and respect their parents while the parents take care to provide godly discipline and instruction for their children while not "provoking" their anger. Paul emphasizes these covenant responsibilities again in his letter to the Colossians.

Some five years later, Peter, in his first letter, writes of need for husbands to remember their responsibility to treat their wives with consideration. They are also reminded that their wives are "heirs of the grace of life" with them (1 Peter 3:11).

At first glance these texts can seem to be severely lacking in detail. After all, the command to love, respect, and submit to one another is fine in theory, but how does that enable a Christian couple to resolve issues of conflict? The answer has to be found in the fleshing out of those virtues within each unique family and cultural context.

Despite cultural and family distinctiveness, the virtues listed above will be realized upon a foundational assumption of interdependence. Of interdependence related to marriage and parenting, Mathews and Hubbard (2004) write:

The aloneness of Adam in Genesis 2:18 was not highlighted to declare his priority in creation but to highlight God's negative judgment on isolation. God created us as sexual beings, equal by virtue of our humanity, related to one another in our createdness and relating to one another as interdependent creatures. . . . God gave the woman and man two tasks—to be fruitful and multiply and to subdue the earth and rule over it. Note that God did not say to the woman, "It's your place to be fruitful and multiply," and to the man, "It's your job to subdue the earth and rule over it." Both commands came to both the man and the woman. Both are to share in parenting, and both are to share in dominion. (p. 179)

Aside from the above observations, it is important to remember that humanity is "fearfully and wonderfully made," and part of the wonder of a person is the uniqueness of each individual. Within the context of family, this individuality gives rise to a variety of marriage and parenting styles that are neither right or wrong in themselves but must be evaluated within the Ephesians principle of love, respect, and submission, remembering that God has not called family members to live in a state of independence and isolation but to form intimate, interdependent community.

**Emotional bonds and the family covenant.** While counseling with a couple who was lamenting the recent behavior of their married daughter, this author listened as the wife commented, "No one can make you as proud or embarrass you as much as one's family." It is true that family relationships have the ability to evoke emotions that are

unsurpassed in intensity by any other relationship. These emotions are part of the strong bonding process than takes place within families:

What is of special importance in the development of a theology of the family is the nature of this relationship between bonding and affect. I would suggest that the essence of this relationship constitutes the essence of the nature of covenant—or commitment, as it is known in the literature of the social sciences. Covenant or commitment is something you give to another that cannot be taken away once it is given. In fact, I believe that this irrevocable deposit of affect we theologically call covenant and sociologically call commitment is the linchpin for a theology of the family. It is the overarching theme that binds a theology of the family together. (Anderson & Guernsey, 1985, p. 47)

The emotional investment into marriage and family is referred to as an “irrevocable deposit of affect.” In an age characterized by rampant divorce rates, emancipation, and abandonment, the thought of an emotional connection that is permanent in nature seems, to many, to be little more than mere fantasy. What many fail to realize is that neither a divorce, nor emancipation, nor an act of abandonment can undo the emotional investment that has already taken place.

As Carl Whittaker points out:

I don’t believe in divorce. Not on religious grounds, but on the grounds that divorce just doesn’t exist. You can fall into love but you can’t fall out. Once you have made a commitment to another, that commitment is irrevocable. You can’t undo what you’ve done. (as cited in Anderson & Guernsey, 1985, p. 47)

Whittaker, like Anderson and Guernsey, makes the point that although a couple may divorce, they cannot possibly recover the emotional investment that has already been made into the life of the former spouse. The formation of a new relationship may, at best, offer temporary emotional relief from divorce-related grief, but it does not provide a permanent resolution, nor will the deposit of affect associated with the former relationship be recovered because of it. One has to ask to what degree contemporary divorce recovery entails an attempt to recover emotional investment that will never be recuperated.

The emotional bonding between parent and child gives rise to powerful emotions during the ebb and flow of life shared. The intensity of this bond is powerfully portrayed in the prodigal son narrative in Luke 15. This text has previously been cited with reference to both the sacredness and faithfulness aspects of the family covenant. At this point, we will look at the issue of emotional bonding between the father and son and the role that it played in the reaction of the father.

In Luke 15:17, the author states that “when he [the younger brother] came to his senses,” he began to consider going home. The King James Version translates that event as “when he came to himself.” It is clear that the prodigal began to come home in his heart before he ever made the literal journey back to his father’s house. Nevertheless, one should not read too much into this. His decision was pragmatic in nature, not spiritual, as he did not yet understand the heart of his father. He only knew that he would probably be accepted in some form if he were to return home. He would, at the very least, be able to nourish his body:



Reconciliation is not a part of his immediate plan. He wants to eat and says so. He is working as a servant in the far country and is starving. He might as well get some job training, establish himself in a new trade, earn a decent salary and be able to eat. Because he has not yet faced his own sin, he cannot possibly understand what reconciliation means or what it costs. (Bailey, 2005, pp. 61-62)

It is apparent that the father not only had parented well but also had provided an example of kindness to those who worked under him. Therefore, the son realized that even if his father were to receive him back as a servant (day laborer) his life would be greatly improved. This is a powerful reminder to parents of the effect that their actions toward others may have on the attitude of their own children toward them.

The fact that his father saw him from “a long way off”, as described in verse 20, suggests that perhaps the father was waiting for, even prepared for the anticipated return of the son. That the son had “come to himself” did not surprise the father. He expected no less. The bond between them had provided a foundation of hope within the heart of the father that allowed him to weather the rebellious years of his son, knowing that he would eventually “come to his senses” as expressed in verse 17. At this point, it seems not to matter to the father what has motivated the return of his son. What is important is that he is coming home. Had this covenant been independent of God’s covenant with humanity, the father could have felt free to impose his own restrictions upon the return of his son to the house. Because of the fact that he understood that his family covenant was but a reflection of God’s covenant with humanity, he reacted differently.

The father's response is heart-stirring, as Luke describes that he "felt compassion on him [the son] and ran and embraced him and kissed him." Again, Christ paints a picture that is difficult for the listeners to imagine:

It is not just a slow shuffle or a fast walk—he races! In the Middle East a man of his age and position *always* walks in a slow, dignified fashion. It is safe to assume that he has not run anywhere for any purpose for forty years. No villager over the age of twenty-five ever runs. But now the father races down the road. To do so, he must take the front edge of his robes in his hand like a teenager. When he does this, his legs show in what is considered a humiliating posture. All of this is painfully shameful for him. The loiterers in the street will be distracted from tormenting the prodigal and will instead run after the father, amazed at seeing this respected village elder shaming himself publicly. (Bailey, 2005, p. 67)

The compassion that causes the good father to react to the sight of his son was born of a deposit of affect resulting from the emotional bond between them. The father felt such deep compassion that he kissed his son again and again. The reality of the covenant is demonstrated through the manifestation of the emotional bond between the father and the son—a covenant that ignores the cultural norms and expectations in favor of reconciliation.

As the fundamental basis for marriage and family, covenant partnership is tough and unrelenting when confronted with disappointments and even unfaithfulness. The first sign of a contradiction in committed relationships is not the end but the beginning of covenant love. Covenant partnership is also resourceful and hopeful.

Where dead ends and repeated failures occur, a new pilgrimage can take place.

(Anderson & Guernsey, 1985, p. 45)

Bailey (2005) points out how the son's response to the outpouring of tender love and compassion demonstrated by his father is to abandon his former plan of appealing to his father as a possible employer. When confronted with the father's love, he no longer feels that he has an adequate solution to his problem. He now realizes that aside from the financial setback, he has broken his father's heart by abandoning the covenant relationship. No amount of labor can heal that. Rather than finish his rehearsed speech, he simply says that he has sinned against his father and heaven, signifying his acknowledgment of breaking covenant with God as well as with his father. Rather than finish his rehearsed speech with an attempt to acquire employment at the hands of his father, he resigns himself to the fact that he has no workable resolution.

The father is quick to initiate the next chapter in the father-son relationship as he calls for a celebration to mark the return of the son. In doing so, he leaves no doubt in the mind of the son as to the state of their covenant. It is still intact.

This author contends that the emotional bonding that results in powerful deposits of affect within families is often intensified within the structure of the missionary family. This is due, in much part, to the two reasons given in chapter 1: the close-knitted nature of many missionary families and the isolation factor and the influence of the host culture. The literature review within the following chapter will examine the intertwining aspects of family systems and family covenant and how they both explain and challenge the missionary family structure.

## CHAPTER 3

### LITERATURE REVIEW

This chapter will look at the available resources offering support to missionary families experiencing the empty nest. The list beneath each section is not intended to be exhaustive in nature, but rather, represents those works and the particular insights that were especially helpful in contributing to this document.

#### **Family Systems Theory**

Peter Senge (2006) in his popular book, *The Fifth Discipline: The Art and Practice of the Learning Organization* emphasizes the importance of being a learning organization. He goes so far as to say that what separates successful organizations from those that are not is the speed at which they learn. This seems to apply readily to family systems in that those families that are flexible enough to learn from their mistakes or from the input from other systems, incorporating the new information into their respective systems, seem to grow (succeed) more readily than those that do not.

Senge talks about how to go about building learning communities. There is one example of particular interest to this author. The superintendent of the West Des Moines public school system attributed the success of his school district to asking the right question, which in his case was, "What is good for the kids?" It seems to this author that the use of a central question or two, within the family context, could help keep families on track, as well.

Although Senge does not address family systems specifically, its application to the understanding of systems in general is invaluable for those who wish to counsel with

families. Although a difference in semantics will be present, many of the ideas in Senge's book closely parallel those that will be examined within the context of family systems.

Dorothy and Raphael Becvar (1999), in *Systems Theory and Family Therapy: A Primer*, have authored a concise description of systems theory as it relates to family therapy. The authors trace the history of family systems theory, paralleling its development with the modern to postmodern transition that has taken place in western culture. Becvar and Becvar have provided a text that can generate a basic understanding of the theory and the fundamental terminology related to it.

Becvar and Becvar (1999) take a close look at first- and second-order cybernetics, giving considerable emphasis to positive and negative feedback. They give an example, contrasting the two types of feedback:

Continued praise for twelve-year-old behavior as part of an ongoing negative feedback loop may participate in the creation of a context that defines expectations on the part of all concerned such that twelve-year-old behavior in an individual continues well into adulthood. Similarly, positive feedback, or the initial arguments and punitive response to staying out too late, may tend to remain in the system with increasing frequency and greater intensity. (p. 27)

For this author, "the *Handbook of Family Therapy, Vol. 2* (Gurman & Kniskern, 1991)" has proven to be the most valuable tool for quick yet thorough research into the primary tenets held by the most well-known family therapists. Twelve models of family therapy are explored, including two of the most prominent: Bowenian theory and therapy and structural family therapy (Salvador Minuchin). Edwin Friedman (1985) addresses

Bowenian theory while Jorge Colapinto (1991) contributes the chapter on Structural family therapy, both described in chapter one.

Another chapter in the book, authored by Ian R. H. Falloon, deals with behavioral family therapy. This model of therapy is characterized by a less rigid pattern than structural family therapy, and certainly with less emphasis on the concept of interdependence, one of Munuchin's basic ideas. Falloon (1991) explains:

Behavioral family therapy has tried to avoid explicit assumptions regarding the definition of a well functioning family. From a learning theory perspective, the most valid manner in which a family can be judged is from the results of its family member. The process by which those results are achieved is considered of secondary importance. (p. 69)

It is the observation of this author that rather than an approach that successfully integrates Bowenian and/or Structural family therapy with a behavioral slant, behavioral family therapy has attempted to provide an ever-increasing body of knowledge based on empirical research. Rather than a model, perhaps it would be better described as a integration of theories that identify with particular behavioral aspects of therapy. This author sees the behavioral family therapy movement as making a valuable contribution in providing a forum for greater understanding of the behavioral aspect of family therapy.

Falloon is noticeably skeptical of the real contribution that behavioral family therapy has made to the understanding of well-functioning families. Two of the reasons that he cites for this are the limitations of the data, due to an ethnical and cultural bias, and the fact that the assumptions made by behavioral family therapy are almost entirely

based on “observations of distressed families and cannot be considered as definitive evidence of the real-life optimal functioning of families” (Falloon, 1991, p. 69).

*Family Therapy in Clinical Practice* (1992) is a collection of Murray Bowen’s papers, spanning two decades (1957-1977). Bowen describes this work as representing “the evolution of Family Systems theory” (p. xiii). The work begins by concentrating on clinical analysis done with families presenting with a member with schizophrenia. This provides a launching pad for the development of the family systems theory, which Bowen further refines to distinguish from other family systems theories, thus establishing Bowenian theory.

### **Structural Family Therapy (Salvador Minuchin)**

Although Minuchin would be considered a family systems theorist, due to the uniqueness of his style when compared with that of Murray Bowen, his theory is examined separately. In *Family Therapy Techniques*, Minuchin and Fishman (1981) highlight several techniques that Minuchin has capitalized on during his years of practice. Among those are spontaneity, joining, planning, reframing, enactment, restructuring, unbalancing, constructions, and paradoxes. There are also chapters that capitalize on change, focus, intensity, boundaries, complementarity, realities, and strengths.

Throughout the book are scripts of various therapy sessions, conducted by Minuchin and others. The scripts are valuable, in that one can easily grasp Minuchin’s style, which includes a willingness to become a part of the family system in order to strengthen the family.

One of the more important sections of the book, for this author, was that which dealt with challenging the family structure of the Mitchells, whose five-year-old boy had been urinating on the floor. As is common for Minuchin, he challenges the thought that the boy is the sick one and, little by little, displays for the family how their interactions affect the actions of the boy.

This text is particularly useful for the counselor who is interested in incorporating structural therapy techniques into his or her counseling model. Due to the palatability of the Structural system for those who have lived in a nonwestern context, this author is especially intrigued by the possibilities of utilizing this model with missionary families.

In *Families and Family Therapy*, Minuchin (1974) again offers glimpses into scenes from the Structural family therapy context. The beginning chapter is a simple introductory chapter that explains structural family therapy. The book contains scripts from therapy sessions or interviews with six families. Of those scripts, this author found the interview with the Gordens to be the most interesting. Montalvo is the primary counselor in this session, and the “identified patient” is a young daughter who has been starting fires in the apartment where she and her single-parent family live.

This author found Montalvo’s approach to be brilliant as he led the mother in an exercise in which she “taught” her young daughter how to light matches carefully and to have water nearby, just in case a fire erupted. This book was found to be incredibly helpful, especially the interviews with the families where the strengths were identified.



## Theology of Marriage and Family

In *On Being Family: A Social Theology of the Family*, authors Ray S. Anderson and Dennis B. Guernsey (1985) take a close look at family within the context of covenant. This book, along with *Marriage as a Covenant: Biblical Law and Ethics as Developed from Malachi* (Hugenberger, 1994) provided the skeletal framework for the formation of chapter 2. Hugenberger's work (1994) is an in-depth study of the book of Malachi and its use as a basis for viewing marriage as a binding covenant. Both works view the basis of marriage as being composed of two primary parts: the verbal affirmation of one's love and devotion for the other and the ratification of that avowal by sexual intercourse. Hugenberger (1994) contends: "During the Old Testament period *verba solemnia* were typically employed as the requisite covenant-ratifying oath for marriage . . . sexual union likewise functioned as a mandatory covenant-ratifying oath-sign for marriage" (p. 217). Similarly, Anderson and Guernsey (1985) state that "the sexual act consummates an implicit contract that requires ratification as an explicit and public contract of marriage" (p. 91).

Anderson and Guernsey (1985), in their critique of modern counseling methods utilized in marriage and family counseling, address the influence that culture has in the formation of marriage and family, an area of study that directly affects missionary families who reflect both their home and host cultures and in essence form a hybrid subculture of their own. They state:

How one believes things "ought to be" is usually influenced strongly by one's own cultural bias. As an institution, the family is the cradle of any culture. Thus, one's bias is primarily established through the influence of one's own family,

which socializes its members into the specifics of its culture. This is particularly true with regard to the roles within the family, relationships and their nature, and the rules for those relationships. (p. 4)

The above comments fall within the context of a healthy criticism of marriage and family counseling techniques that strongly reflect the culture of the teacher. This author agrees with the conclusion that many of these techniques have to be strongly tweaked in order for them to be effective in other cultures.

Anderson and Guernsey (1985) also observe that psychology has been unwisely used in many arenas of marriage and family counseling:

However, psychology has struggled with understanding the family itself as a unit. The disparity between the views of the person as an individual and the person as a member of a family has created a difficult if not irreconcilable tension for some within the discipline. (p. 5)

A third criticism made is that approaches made within the Christian counseling arena have been “biblically superficial and theologically shallow” (Anderson & Guernsey, 1985, p. 5). They observe that, in an effort to respond to an expressed need for help with marriages and families, helping professionals have espoused ideas that are assumed to be biblically and theologically sound when, in fact, at times they are not. Their solution to this problem is the development of biblical and theological scholars who will respond to the needs within the church without abandoning their clerical professions. This author will note that 25 years have passed since the writing of this book begging the question of whether this need has been sufficiently addressed. Within his own context, he would be obliged to say that it has not been.

*Marriage Made in Eden: A Pre-modern Perspective for a Post-Christian World*

(Mathews & Hubbard, 2004) looks at marriage in the twenty-first century, from a biblical standpoint. While understanding the role of the Spirit in transforming marriages, the authors take a realistic look at the challenges facing Christian couples:

It is in the tension of the already-but-not-yet of the present age that marriage must be lived out. In a real sense, as bent and broken image-bearers, we have been restored. We are already participants in the resurrection life of Jesus Christ. Yet we are members of that not yet fully realized kingdom where all will be liberated from the present bondage to decay and brought into the glorious freedom of the children of God (Rom. 8:21). And marriage in the already-but-not-yet of the present age reflects both the not yet completed restoration of God's people and the reality of the already present power of Christ's resurrection life. (p. 199)

Unfortunately, many Christian marriages fail to acknowledge the central truth that is stated above. Because of that, Christian couples expect to have a perfect marriage while others have resigned themselves to an attempt to survive an unhappy union. Both extremes fail to comprehend the eschatological truth expressed by Mathews and Hubbard (2004): that marriage reflects the tension of the already-but-not-yet.

In looking at marriage in the twenty-first century, Mathews and Hubbard (2004) identify two constants: Marriage will continue to be God's plan and will be characterized by human sinfulness and failure. With reference to postmodernism and its effect on the idea of biblical marriage, the authors see the church, in promoting marriage as God's plan, as continuing to operate in a countercultural position. Optimistically, they hope for the church to be able to make a positive impact on culture, through example:

People appear to be hardwired for relationship and have a lifelong need for permanence. It is true that people (Christians and non-Christians alike) are often unable to achieve permanence in their relationships, but the pain and fragmentation of their lives when committed relationships fail are evidence that the postmodern world cannot disregard. Freedom may be the heady wine of autonomy, but commitment—lifelong—is the bread of human relationships that sustains our daily lives. (p. 223)

Balswick & Balswick (2007), in *The Family: A Christian Perspective on the Contemporary Home*, utilize the trinitarian model as it relates to family relationships, while acknowledging that we live in a sinful world and that our struggle will be characterized by imperfections and flaws.

This author found the Balswick and Balswick (2007) text to be very helpful in that, aside from laying a biblical foundation for marriage and family, the authors used a lifespan development model to develop the text. In doing so, they address issues of marriage and family that surface during varying periods of life.

The authors deal specifically with those families who have adolescents, emphasizing the importance of preserving relationship during this period. Of special interest is the following paragraph that deals specifically with the issue of missionary families and the empty nest:

Children will, of course, make mistakes; this is part of the learning process.

Because of the prevalence of parental determinism—the view that good parenting can ensure that children will turn out well—many parents feel unwarranted guilt when their children make mistakes. If parental love and discipline could ensure

that children will turn out well, God would have nothing but perfect children.

(Balswick & Balswick, 2007, p. 168)

The authors address an issue that is a common factor among missionary parents who are facing the empty nest. The irrational guilt that these parents can experience is, at times, crippling. This issue is referred to in chapter four. Balswick and Balswick (2007) not only address this issue but also are quick, in other sections of the text, to address areas of shortcoming within their own family experience.

*The Family in Christian Perspective* (Scudder, 1962) makes a case for “vigorous idealism” (p. 5) as it relates to Christian family life today. Scudder emphasizes the need for families to look to the Bible first before formulating important decisions. He writes:

There is no real challenge to attainment in limited goals, which are accommodated to man’s situation and his ability to achieve. Jesus set forth no halfway ideals or goals, and God is satisfied with nothing less than perfection. Neither should man be satisfied with less. (p. 6)

Scudder (1962) also understands the plight of today’s family that must exist and thrive in a fallen world: “Where there is conviction, confession, and repentance, there is hope; and the foundation for that hope is in the forgiveness and grace of God” (p. 6). Although the text is nearly fifty years old, because of the fact that Scudder’s work speaks to the basics of family life, as addressed by the Bible, it is timeless. He speaks specifically to the importance of wholesomely preparing children to leave the nest:

Children must be taught to handle freedom from an early age. Wider freedom should be given as children give evidence that they are learning to use it responsibly. . . . Members of the family must balance their rights and

responsibilities against those of others. They must learn to respect the rights of others and not take selfish advantage. (Scudder, 1962, p. 107)

Kenneth E. Bailey (2005), in *The Cross and the Prodigal: Luke 15 Through the Eyes of Middle Eastern Peasants*, gives an excellent treatment of the parable of the prodigal son, which, rather than concentrating on the sorry condition of the son, emphasizes the example set by the good father, who is willing, at any cost, to rescue the wayward child. This author utilized the text to highlight the aspects of sacredness and emotional bonds within the context of family covenant.

Bailey's unusual insight into this parable informs the reader as to the expected strength of the family covenant that looks to God as the real model for parenting. He emphasizes that the good father acted in ways that were certainly countercultural in response to a son who had failed miserably:

The word *run* in Greek (*dramōn*) is the technical term used for the footraces in the stadium. Paul uses this word a number of times in this sense (1 Corinthians 9:24, 26; Galatians 2:2; 5:7; 2 Thessalonians 3:1; Hebrews 12:1). Luke is a well-educated man who chooses his words carefully. Thus we can translate the phrase, "His father saw him and had compassion and *raced*." It is not just a slow shuffle or a fast walk—he races! In the Middle East a man of his age and position *always* walks in a slow, dignified fashion. It is safe to assume that he has not run anywhere for any purpose for forty years. No villager over the age of twenty-five ever runs. But now the father *races* down the road. To do so, he must take the front edge of his robes in his hand like a teenager. When he does this, his legs show in what is considered a humiliating posture . . . (Bailey, 2005, p. 67)

In short, Bailey's work challenged this reader to take a careful look at family covenant and parental responsibility, even when the child's behavior is less than perfect. The unconditional forgiveness and acceptance exemplified in this narrative characterize a parenting style that models, above all, redemption.

Missionary children frequently go through severe adaptation difficulties when they return to the United States after having spent most of their lives on the mission field. Not infrequently, they stray from the value system of their parents and church family. This author has observed that the guilt and shame that missionaries frequently feel when faced with struggling college-age children sometimes serves to create a significant rupture in the parent-child relationship. Bailey's portrayal of the hope of the good father encourages the reader to take courage while in what could otherwise be viewed as a hopeless scenario and unapologetically seek, above all, the spiritual and emotional health of the child.

*Church Dogmatics: The Doctrine of Creation* (Barth, 1958) provides foundational theological material with respect to marriage and family covenant and how the roots of this covenant are found in the creation itself. The author looks at creation as the external basis of the covenant between God and man—that same covenant that becomes the model for marriage and family covenant.

Of creation and covenant, Barth (1958) writes:

Creation comes first in the series of works of the triune God and is thus the beginning of all things distinct from God Himself. Since it contains in itself the beginning of time, its historical reality eludes all historical observation and account, and can be expressed in the biblical creation narratives only in the form

of pure saga. But according to this witness the purpose and therefore the meaning of the creation is to make possible the history of God's covenant with man which has its beginning, its centre and its culmination in Jesus Christ. The history of this covenant is as much the goal of creation as creation itself is the beginning of this history (p. 41).

Barth (1994) further expands on the fundamental teaching of covenant, making the point that humanity is created for covenant relationship and that he or she cannot truly exist, as a person, apart from being a part of a covenant relationship. "To be a fellow man is the decisive determination of the nature of man" (p. 194).

### **Marriage and Family Counseling Within the Church**

As with the other categories, this review is not intended to be exhaustive but rather a compilation of the materials that this author found *especially* helpful with respect to the issue at hand.

Guernsey (1996), in *Psychodynamic Marriage Counseling with Christians*, addresses the subject of early narcissistic injury and how it relates to marital problems that can surface after years of marriage. He says:

It is my belief that unresolved issues with our families of origin are projected upon those who become significant to us in the present—whether in our marriage, in our family of procreation (our relationships as parents with our children), or even in our work and career settings. Often the issues are "inside" us rather than in the one onto whom we are projecting. . . . It is also my belief that the most significant issues we must deal with in terms of our families of origin, those that



often lead to narcissistic injury, are the attachment patterns we had with our earliest caregivers. (p. 31)

The scenario that Guernsey focuses on is particularly relevant to missionary couples that are dealing with the empty nest. He points out that the projection can be directed at people other than the spouse. In the case of missionary couples, this can signify a rupturing of relationships with coworkers on the field, whether missionary colleagues or members of the host culture.

In *Couple Communication* (Oliver & Miller, 1996) the authors lay important groundwork for addressing the problem of communication in marriages:

When Adam and Eve sinned in the Garden of Eden, humankind was affected in many ways, not the least of which was our ability to communicate. Sin not only erected a barrier between God and humans, but also produced relational barriers between men and women. (p. 87)

Oliver and Miller (1996) present an important already-but-not-yet balance to Barth's idea that people cannot fully be persons aside from covenant relationship by reminding the reader that although we are made for relationship, nevertheless we live in a fallen world and part and parcel of any marriage is the challenge to communicate effectively. The authors validate the uniqueness of communication styles in marriages, understanding that the dynamics of each style develop over time.

Carder, Henslin, Townsend, Cloud, and Brawand (1991), in *Secrets of Your Family Tree: Healing for Adult Children of Dysfunctional Families*, address the problem of unhealthy family systems within the context of the church. Chapter five is particularly

helpful for those who are ministering to pastors and missionaries. Brawand lists seven common denominators that contribute to dysfunction living in the ministry:

1. Hidden or repressed anger, often involving unresolved conflicts from the past.
2. Endless living in the fast lane.
3. The superstar syndrome.
4. Habitually hiding one's own deep needs.
5. Operating without a personal support system.
6. Establishing only superficial relationships with others.
7. Allowing expectations of oneself and others to drive one to the point of exhaustion and burnout (pp. 118-119).

This author, in his experience counseling with missionary couples, has frequently seen these factors operating. Frequently two or more of the factors are present, and at times, the author has seen couples who present with one or both demonstrating all of the above characteristics.

For the missionary couple experiencing an empty nest crisis, the unhealthy factors listed have already contributed to an emotional state that is compromised and serve to exacerbate the downward spiral that began with the departure of their children from the family home. In many cases, burnout, in one or both spouses, is as much a contributing factor to the crisis as is the empty nest. Brawand (1991) describes the process that leads up to this:

People who enter the ministry are often "people helpers" at heart, which is admirable. But when they carry people helping to such an extreme that they cannot feel good about themselves unless they are continually doing good for

others, even to the point of joylessness and exhaustion, they have fallen into a dysfunctional pattern. Eventually, a slow resentment will build in them as they find themselves “manipulated” by unreasonable demands. Unless their own deeper needs are satisfied and unless they learn some of the healthy patterns described in this book, burnout and dropout will almost surely result. (p. 120)

Brawand (1991) concludes with a list of practical suggestions that, if incorporated, will enable Christian workers to lead a healthier lifestyle. Prominent among her suggestions is the recommendation to incorporate the assistance of friends and fellow workers into one’s life and ministry.

Friedman (1985), in *Generation to Generation: Family Process in Church and Synagogue*, devotes chapter 4 to addressing child-focused families. These family systems self-perpetuate as generation after generation learns to focus on problems of one or more of the children, rather than addressing concerns about the functioning of the system as a whole. Friedman explains:

If the world of counseling generally tends to focus on individual symptoms rather than on family emotional process, this is particularly the case when the symptom is located in a child. This is most unfortunate because children tend to occupy the least influential position in the family hierarchy. At the bottom of the totem pole, they are usually the most helpless to affect a process that has made them into the family symptom-bearer. It is also unfortunate because it allows the other family members to avoid their own contributions to the problem. The fact that models of individual therapies tend to organize their thinking and their clinics around

children's symptoms often reinforces such family process, even when the parents are seen "in addition" in order to "help" the child (Friedman, 1985, p. 100)

Missionary families who have failed to develop healthy systems and adapted a child-focused style of dealing with systemic issues can reach a critical point quickly when that child leaves home to begin college. During this season, parents must decide whether to address the systemic issues or continue, by long distance, to utilize the child as a symptom bearer.

### **Lifespan Development and the Empty Nest**

Elliott Rosen (1999), in *Men in Transition: The New Man*, addresses the empty nest experience for men. It is his observation that, in recent years, this experience has grown to be more than a female issue and that the effects of it are being observed in the lives of middle-aged men at increasing rates. He cites the need to realign neglected relationships and a redefining of the relationship between father and children as the primary challenges the husband will face during this period. If the father has failed to nurture interpersonal relationships, aside from those with his children, what lies ahead for him is a daunting task. He adds:

Marriages can be sorely tested at this point, and indeed, while unheard of only a generation or two ago, divorce after twenty-five years of marriage is becoming increasingly common . . . separation and divorce may serve as a substitute for undone personal emotional work or a search for the fountain of youth. (p. 138)

The good news is that those who successfully negotiate through the empty nest phase can enjoy a time of increased productivity in their personal and professional lives.

Lynn Blacker (1999) reports that this period can be characterized by increased enjoyment of life and happiness. Blacker comments:

The launching phase must be understood in terms of the life stage in which it occurs: midlife. Although the terms “launching” and “midlife” overlap, they are not synonymous. Launching is just one of many life cycle tasks that must be accomplished during the middle years. Like launching children, the other midlife tasks involve a significant realignment of family roles. These other tasks of midlife include becoming a couple again; developing adult relationships with adult children; accepting new family members through marriage and birth; and resolving issues for providing care for, and finally burying their parents. (p. 287)

### **Cross-Cultural Counseling**

It is the belief of this author that one who counsels missionary families must possess at least minimum skills in counseling those of a different cultural background. The missionary family who has served in an international context for a significant period of time is a part of a hybrid culture that has effectively assimilated aspects of the host culture with aspects of the home culture. Therapists not skilled in counseling those of another culture will not pick up on important elements that both contribute to and potentially serve to bring healing.

In *Counseling the Culturally Different: Theory and Practice*, Sue (1990) cites several components of the communication process that are especially important in counseling those who are from a distinct culture: nonverbal communication, proxemics (the perception and use of personal and interpersonal space), kinesics (body movements),

paralanguage (vocal cues that individuals use to communicate), and high-low context communication (pp. 52-58).

The culturally sensitive counselor will recognize, in counseling missionary families, the use of one or more of these communication mechanisms, which may not necessarily be a part of the communication style of the missionary's home culture but nevertheless are incorporated into his or her current communication style.

### **Grief Counseling**

Missionary families who are going through the empty nest period face the end of an important phase for the family. Recognition and normalization of the stages of grief can bring comfort to a hurting family. Elisabeth Kübler-Ross (1969), in *On Death and Dying: What the Dying Have to Teach Doctors, Nurses, Clergy, and Their Own Families*, addresses death and dying and effectively guides the reader who is facing significant grief. The grief experience, not limited to physical death, accompanies the "death" of a life stage and can serve to effectively prepare family members for the next phase of life.

### **Ethics**

This author has found the ethical issues to be highly complex in counseling missionary families. Frequently the people who express a need for intervention are *not* strangers to the counselor, and therefore a conflict of interest exists from the beginning. For that reason, it has been necessary to refer many of the clients to another professional.

*Ethical, Legal, and Professional Issues in the Practice of Marriage and Family Therapy* has served as a valuable source for guiding information to maneuver through

difficult scenarios. Huber (1994) addresses the need for professionalism in the field of marriage and family therapy, giving more than ample attention to legal and professional concerns.

The complexities that accompany counseling with missionary families are diverse and numerous. Conflict of interest, how HIPAA guidelines should be applied when utilizing a privately funded insurance, and confidentiality and ministerial discipline are just a few of the factors that muddy the waters. Huber (1994) makes a valuable contribution toward laying a good foundation for decision making in these contexts.

### **Counseling Missionary Families in Particular**

*Understanding and Nurturing the Missionary Family*, edited by Pam Echerd and Alice Arathoon (1989) is a compendium of the International Conference on Missionary Kids held in Quito, Ecuador, in 1987. Quito is home to one of the largest international missionary kid schools in the world. Much of the material in this text is devoted to effective parenting of missionary children.

Of particular interest is chapter 13, which addresses nurturing missionary families in transition. Although the empty nest transition is not addressed directly, general information applicable to families going through that transition is found.

In *Doing Member Care Well: Perspectives and Practices from Around the World*, editor Tiffany O'Donnell (2002) has pulled together contributions from those who are involved in missionary member care. This book is especially valuable in that it addresses regional distinctions with respect to member care. Known for his contribution to

missionary member care, David Pollock, in chapter 2, addresses the formation of member care groups and the training of the caregivers.

*Too Valuable to Lose: Exploring the Causes and Cures of Missionary Attrition*, edited by William Taylor (1997), is a compilation of writings that examine missionary attrition worldwide. It looks not only at American missionaries but also takes into consideration missions agencies from many other countries. Of particular importance is chapter 23, also written by David Pollock, which addresses missionary kids and attrition. Although, again, little attention is given to the empty nest experience, the information found is valuable in assisting families who are facing this phase of life.



## CHAPTER 4

### CASE STUDIES

Couples who participated in the case studies were selected due to their unique circumstances. While one couple had gone through the empty nest transition several years earlier, both of the other couples were in the transition at the time that they participated in the case studies.

In preparation for the formal interviews, each couple received two documents: The informed consent form (Appendix A) and the Questionnaire for Missionary Empty Nesters (Appendix B). Pseudonyms are used in each case study.

#### **Case Study 1: Hank and Angela Shaw**

Hank and Angela Shaw are a married missionary couple and parents of two children: Chloe, who is 15, and Joey, who is 13. Their scenario is unique in that they have recently sent the two children to boarding school, thus creating somewhat of a premature empty nest.

Hank is the son and only child of missionaries and he grew up on the field, from the age of six until his graduating year from high school. He has fond memories of growing up on the field and describes coming back for his final year of high school in the U.S., as a difficult experience. Due to his parents' geographic placement, Hank, throughout his school years, was able to live at home and attend school locally, usually attending American-style schools. He remembers his life being divided into two parts: the part spent with American kids in the school he attended—a life characterized by spiritual compromise and duplicity—and his church life, which was spent with Uruguayan youth.

He was not able to date due to the fact that his parents forbade him to date unbelievers or non-Americans.

Hank reports that his father was frequently gone during his childhood. Although his mother was the primary caregiver, and his relationship with her seemed to be stronger than that with his father, there was no questioning who the authority figure was in the family. “He still was the authority figure both over myself and my mother.”

Hank attended a denominational college for his first year, due to the fact that his parents were furloughing that year and that would provide an opportunity for him to continue to be with them. His plans were to change schools at the end of the year and enroll in a college where he could prepare to be an engineer.

During the first year at college, Hank’s spiritual life began to develop, and he decided to change his major to biblical studies. Sensing a call to full time ministry, he decided to become involved in world missions. After spending 18 months on an internship and a period of time involved in ministry in a metropolitan area of the United States, Hank decided to apply for a missions internship. It was during this internship that he made the decision to return to the mission field as a career missionary. While he was preparing to return, he met Angela Taylor, who was to become his wife.

Angela is the youngest of four siblings—two sisters and a brother. She grew up the daughter of a pastor whose ministry consisted, primarily, of founding new churches; thus, her upbringing, like that of her future husband, consisted of several relocations. She perceived her family as being close and is grateful for the guidance they gave her during her developmental years.

Angela reported that during childhood she was closest to her brother, who was three years older than she. He, seemingly, was the one constant that she could count on throughout the moves and adolescent challenges.

Angela began college but remained for only a semester. For financial reasons, she dropped out and moved back in with her parents. She reports that it was while trying to decide what she wanted to do with the rest of her life that she met Hank. Their relationship developed quickly, and within months they were engaged to be married. During their first year together, they moved to the mission field, where Angela began language study. She was one of the youngest missionary wives in her group and faced consequent insecurities. The following is a quote from the personal history paper she submitted to the mission board prior to leaving:

If someone had asked me if I wanted to be a missionary before I met Hank, I probably would have said no. I was rather scared of the idea at first because I didn't know what I had to offer or if I could handle the responsibility. I have no special talents or abilities that I am aware of and I am not as old or experienced as most missionaries' wives. However, the more I began to realize that God wanted Hank and I to be married, I began to see that I just have to be a good wife to Hank and willing to be used by God and He will work everything out. (Shaw, 1986, p. 5)

After a year in language school, Hank and Angela arrived in their city of assignment. Hank felt very much at home in the culture, while Angela went through all of the normal missionary adjustments.

Following a series of medical examinations, Hank and Angela learned that their chances of having biological children were slim. It was at that point that they began to look at the possibility of adoption. Unlike many parents who adopt, they were given a trial run when they assisted an American couple in adopting a child from the field where they served. The local adoption laws stated that adopting parents had to reside in country, so while the legalities were being worked out, Hank and Angela foster parented the newborn child who was being adopted.

The Shaws hired a local attorney to assist them in locating and facilitating an adoption of their own. Within a few months, they learned of the possibility to adopt Chloe. They were allowed to go to the hospital and be present for the birth. Chloe's mother expressed her wish to not see Chloe, so Hank and Angela received the baby about forty minutes after the birth occurred.

Within two years, and through similar circumstances, the Shaws were able to adopt their son, Joey. He was a particularly active baby, and Angela found the first few months with him to be very challenging. Hank assisted, however, and became very involved in the nurturing process of the two children.

Elementary school years were a challenge in that, although Chloe and Joey were native to the mission field where they were living, their first language was English. The parents decided to place them in an interdenominational missionary kid school with mostly other American students. After a time in this setting, they decided to place them in a national private school. Although the second option seemed to work better than the first, neither seemed to be the perfect fit.

To add to the pressures during this period, Angela's mother, who had been diagnosed with a terminal disease years before, passed away. Having barely begun to recover from this loss, they experienced the unexpected loss of Hank's father. It was during the year that followed that Hank and Angela decided that they would not return to the field where they had been serving after their next furlough.

Upon returning to the United States, due to concerns surrounding some symptoms that she had been experiencing, Angela began to undergo a series of medical tests that confirmed her fears. She was diagnosed with a life-altering disease.

The furlough was an extended one of about two years, and during that time the Shaws decided that they would change not only fields but regions as well, which would entail learning a new language. During this furlough, both children began to feel very comfortable in the United States and to put down roots. As furlough came to an end and the time arrived for them to leave for their new field, it was apparent that Chloe, now 13, wanted nothing to do with the move. Although Joey had strong reservations, his temperament lent itself to embracing, with resolve, the pending move.

Once the Shaws arrived in their new country, it was apparent that adolescence had hit their home, with full force. It became difficult for them to differentiate between what is "normal adolescence," the MK (missionary kid) factor, the element of adoption, and effects of the geographic transition.

This author met with the Shaws six months ago, in their context. Both Hank and Angela were very open about the challenges they were facing with their two teenagers. Angela found it hard to communicate with Chloe, and Joey's behavior was described as sometimes explosive.

Adding further complexity to their situation, the national school that the children had attended had proven not to be a suitable fit. In the questionnaire, the Shaws describe that experience:

They attended an international school that they were initially very excited about, but the drastic change of values that they were exposed to affected their behavior and outlook. This led to a lot of conflicts with them and between us. (personal communication, October 6, 2010)

Following their experience with this schooling situation, the Shaws decided to attempt home schooling. It became clear, after a short time, that Joey and Chloe were not satisfied with that as a long-term solution.

It was during this period that the Shaws began to give serious consideration to sending both of the children to an MK boarding school. Although the school they were considering had received high recommendations from other parents, the thought of “giving up” their children at this point in their lives was a sobering idea for both Hank and Angela.

During an interview with the Shaws, Angela reported feeling guilty at the thought of sending their children away during this phase of their lives. “It seems as though we are shirking our duty as parents,” she said. Even though the academy they were considering mandated continual parental involvement while children were studying there, both parents seemed to view sending Joey and Chloe to boarding school as somehow representing a certain “finality” with respect to their direct involvement in the lives of their children. (personal interview, May 22, 2010)

The Shaws made the difficult decision to send their children to boarding school. This author had the opportunity to spend five days with both parents six weeks after they had left their children at the academy.

During the time spent with them, the emotional pain they felt was evident. Hank described the state of their children as being “gone but not gone.” Even though Joey and Chloe were in another country, they were able to communicate with their parents, if they chose, on a daily basis, usually by cell phone. On one occasion, the author happened into the room where Angela had just concluded a phone conversation with Joey. As she wiped the tears away, in a low voice, she said, “Oh, bubby” (personal interview, October 5, 2010).

During a conversation with Hank (personal interview, October 22, 2010), he said, “When I walk into Chloe’s room and feel the sadness, it’s not necessarily because she’s gone . . . but there is guilt because of what brought us to the decision to send them to boarding school.” Clearly, unresolved issues of concern occupy the thoughts of both parents during the absence of the children. The following is a quote from the questionnaire for missionary empty nesters that addresses their emotions in the months following the departure of their children:

Positive: Relief that our kids were in an environment where they could grow spiritually, socially, academically, etc. Negative: Sad they we wouldn’t have the everyday influence in their lives that they still need. Also feelings of guilt that our choices hadn’t been able to provide them with the environment they needed.

(Shaw & Shaw, 2011, p. 1)

Angela, who perhaps has been an overly invested mother, now finds it hard to control the aspects of her children's lives that were much easier to monitor prior to their going to boarding school. Details, such as making sure that Joey has a hair cut prior to the taking of school pictures, become larger than life due to geographic distance that now separates them.

When asked about the effect that the absence of their children has had on their marriage, Hank responded that the last couple of years have been, by far, the most taxing on their marriage, due, in great part, to conflict surrounding the lives of the children. In his opinion, at least initially, the absence of the children has enabled them to take a bit of a breather from the norm (personal interview, October 22, 2010). Months later, Hank responded to the questionnaire with a similar response, reporting that their children being in boarding school has had a positive effect on his and Angela's relationship. (Shaw & Shaw, 2011, p. 1)

### **Case Study 2: Carl and Paula Smith**

It was the desire of this author to develop a case study of a missionary couple who had gone through the empty nest but still have clear memories of the effect it had on their relationship and ministry. Carl and Paula Smith, who have served as foreign missionaries for more than 20 years, are now several years removed from the initial impact of the empty nest experience.

The author did not have access to the quantity of background information that was available for case study one; however, both the questionnaire and the personal interview produced considerable material.



Although both husband and wife expressed that they believe that they are a close-knit family (Smith, 2010 p. 1), Paula communicated that she would have liked for them to have been closer, prior to their daughter, Tiffany's, departure from the family home. Although she attempted to be open with Tiffany, Paula does not feel that she always reciprocated. Carl communicated that he felt that his and Tiffany's communication during her last years at home was somewhat superficial. Both agree that, during her high school years, Tiffany's rebellion was significant.

Carl and Paula sent Tiffany back to the United States from the field two consecutive summers prior to her graduation from high school. They believe this was a positive step in preparing both them and Tiffany for her college years, as Tiffany became more acquainted with U.S. culture while Carl and Paula developed a sense for what life would be like when their only child left for college. In addition, Paula cleared her calendar, as much as possible, during Tiffany's senior year in order to give priority to her activities and spending time with her:

I was praying for her and thinking only one more year and it helped me make a positive choice to adjust my ministry involvement in order to really be available for her. I'm grateful I did and believe that came about during a time of prayer. I remember I felt I had given my time, energy, and finances to do all I could to make it a great year and it made me feel good and with no regrets. (Smith, 2010, p. 1)

Neither Carl nor Paula remembers receiving any type of orientation to help prepare them for the empty nest. What is clear, however, is that Paula was proactive in preparing for the future:

The years of Tiffany's rebellion, we took her and her friends every Wednesday to the Union church for youth group and they had a great library. I checked out a lot of books and read a lot of books that encouraged me in dealing with her and also ideas of how to prepare for separation. I also was assertive to talk to other missionary women and ask how they dealt with the separation and distance. I do not recall receiving anything from the mission office in regards to guidance, but really wasn't looking for it from headquarters either. (Smith, 2010, p. 1)

As Paula became more involved in Tiffany's life during her senior year of high school, it seemed to help precipitate an early mourning process:

It was fun and exciting for me to help Tiffany with these events whether by talking, fund raising, shopping for clothes, chauffeuring, etc., and yet when I was alone and thinking about it, I would have times of mourning and crying. We talked a lot that year at suppertime and I would get teary eyed and remember Tiffany telling me to stop crying. (Smith, 2010, p. 1)

Although the grieving process had begun prior to Tiffany leaving home, her departure would still affect Carl and Paula emotionally. Although several years have passed since then, the following is an excerpt of a vivid description of the experience:

I remember coming home and the house so quiet. No phone calls. No music. I remembered how when I left for college, my relationship changed with my family. I was pretty independent too. I remember telling Carl, motherhood, how I had known it, changed overnight. She left a week or two after graduation and life had been so busy and celebrating for what seemed months, and over night it was all over. Carl went up on the roof of our house and watched the planes take off

and cried. I laid down on the bed and cried. The next day was presbytery meetings and we went, but our hearts weren't there. We scheduled a college team for the next week purposely in order to keep busy and not focus on the loss, but I was so sad and depressed I couldn't go with the team. I think I cried for three days. Carl was worried. He called Joyce Harringer to go check on me. I think it was the end of the 3 days and that morning I had gone outside to sit in the sun and was weeping and the Lord spoke to me that it was time to stop crying. (Smith, 2010, pp. 1-2)

Despite the intense grief that Paula experienced, she also noted that there were positive aspects that came along with the empty nest experience. Of the transition that took place in her marriage, she commented:

After we got over being sad, we enjoyed not having to hear complaints that she wanted to leave now or was bored; or had to be back to the capital for car pool or after school events, etc. I think we enjoyed the freedom we had had as newlyweds in the house. I think it drew us closer together. I remember we told couples that the empty nest wasn't all bad, but there were some good things too. (Smith, 2010, pp. 1-2)

In fact, Paula is clear that the empty nest transition resulted in more productive ministry for her as a missionary wife. Relationships with national pastors and denominational leaders improved as a result of her having more time to invest in related activities. Conversely, a negative result of the empty nest period was a feeling of "disconnectedness" with the interdenominational missionary body. While her daughter was at home, she had been very involved in the governing board of the school that

Tiffany attended. When Tiffany graduated, Paula resigned from this position and consequently lost touch with many of the families with whom she had been connected during the previous years.

In response to question 13 of the questionnaire, Paula seems to indicate somewhat of a sense of relief that Tiffany was no longer on the field:

I know when Tiffany was struggling so much, I had spiritual battles of my own in regards of were we depriving her, no camps, no strong church she connected with, had a hard time finding affordable clothes that fit and that she liked, no jobs for her to own her own spending money, etc. etc.. Actually comparing her life to our own growing up and the things we had enjoyed. I had to come to a place of trusting and believing God had Tiffany there in that country for her own good and protection. As she got older and our experience of high school her freshman year in the States, I was more convinced of that fact. (Smith, 2010, p. 3)

### **Case Study 3: David and Sherri Hurley**

David and Sherri are currently serving their second term on their field. They went to the field as parents of two teenagers. At the time that they participated in this research, they had been back on the field but a few months, having left their youngest child, a daughter, at college, before they returned.

Both David and Sherri reported that they were a close family; however, the relationship that they shared with their youngest child was quite distinct from that which they had with the older sibling. The following is a description, given by Sherri, of their youngest:

Our youngest daughter is more strong-willed and likes to be more independent. She is a very hard worker and seems to be able to accomplish anything she sets her mind to. I would say our relationship is very good—but she pushes harder to be more independent. So at times, there is more conflict in the relationship. She's not as open to sharing or talking if she doesn't feel like it. (Hurley, 2011, p. 1)

Communication between the Hurleys and their youngest seemed to be particularly problematic during her senior year in high school, greatly affecting the transition period that would lie ahead. Added to the unique emotions that missionary couples feel when they say good-bye to their children and head back to the field was the anxiety that accompanied a parental-child relationship that was tenuous, at best. Although the relationship has begun to improve, both the questionnaires and the interview made it clear that the feelings were still raw.

The Hurleys indicated, in the questionnaire, a broader array of emotions than did the other participating couples. While Sherri indicated experiencing anxiety, excitement, fear, guilt, liberation, profound sadness, and relief (Hurley, 2011, p. 2) David reported sensing ambivalence, anger, anxiety, confusion, emotional deadness, fear, frustration, guilt, liberation, peace, relief, and spiritual weakness (Hurley, 2011, p. 2).

The lack of support they felt from their missions sending agency was articulated. In response to whether she felt that she and David had received adequate support from the mission, Sherri responded:

I would have to say “no” to this question. Because really I didn't feel like we received any support from the mission's office before they left home. They received a packet from the MK office with hints on getting ready for college, etc.,

but as parents we didn't really receive any information about what to expect or what was available to help us get them to school i.e. information about the policies for taking a child to school, the policy on their one trip home, etc.

(Hurley, 2011, p. 1)

Although their transition was far from ideal, the Hurleys reported that the effect on their marriage had been positive overall. David reported that transition had brought him and Sherri closer together "in many ways: physically, spiritually, emotionally, and sexually" (Hurley, 2011, p. 3). He reported that he and his wife, as opposed to before, when their time and energy were greatly invested into the lives of their children, are now able to be together all the time, spending time laughing, working, and praying, without making allowances for the needs of the children. He expressed enjoying the newfound spontaneity.

When asked what resources they felt would be helpful for missionary couples going through the empty nest, the Hurleys' response was more extensive than that of the other couples, perhaps indicating the freshness of their experience. They recommended that the mission become more proactive in addressing this need in the life of missionary parents, making online counseling materials available to those approaching this period. They also felt that area leaders should make contact with those going through this transition period, making themselves available to the family for counseling, direction, or spiritual encouragement. Along with this, they felt that the missionary kid department of the mission should also make more resources available to the children who are preparing for college.

### **Case Study Summary**

The above case studies are distinct in many ways. While an abundance of background material was available for the Shaws, that which was incorporated into the study for the Smiths and the Hurleys was much more restricted, from a timeline standpoint. The questionnaire responses from these two couples, however, were much more comprehensive than that from the Shaws.

Although the three couples share a common experience, their responses on the questionnaires are quite varied. In fact, out of the 21 emotions listed on the questionnaire, only four of those were shared by more than half of those participating in the study: fear, guilt, profound sadness, and relief.

Perhaps due to personal experience, the author found guilt to be the most intriguing of the common responses. It appears as though the guilt comes from a common thread in three of the responses: In the case of the Shaws, it was due to Hank's sensation that he had subjected the children to an environment (the new field to which they had transferred) that had necessitated them having to leave the family home and attend boarding school. Similarly, the Hurleys both reported feeling guilty that they had somewhat "abandoned" their children by not providing a home that they could return to from college.

Understanding one's emotional tendencies and "normal" way of handling stressful times of transition can be particularly helpful in preparing for any transition, including the empty nest. It appears that among all those who participated in the questionnaire, Paula invested more time into intentional preparation for the empty nest experience than the others. Interestingly, she reports a more intensely emotional grief

experience than any of the others. It is the conclusion of this author that she anticipated this response, and in so doing, made a more concentrated effort than the others to prepare for it.

### **Task Group Findings**

In 2010, this author and his wife formed a task group with two other couples and a single (widowed) missionary. The other two couples and the single missionary were either in the beginning stages of the empty nest experience or approaching it.

The purpose of the group was to explore the empty nest phenomenon and the effect it had and is having on the lives of the participants and colleagues with whom they serve or have served on the field. While assessing the effects experienced by the participants and their colleagues, it was the hope of this writer to develop methods of prevention and response that would address the potential crisis experienced by missionary families.

The author's plan was to compose a group of six to eight members. Since the group meetings would be held weekly, it was necessary to choose group members from those missionaries who were currently living temporarily in proximity. Considering that the dynamics surrounding missionary adjustment to empty nest experienced by those serving on a foreign field are unique to those who are based stateside, the group was composed primarily of members who had recently been on the field and would be returning soon.

The prerequisite that the group be composed of missionaries who are approaching empty nest or are currently in the midst of that dynamic was met. With the above two



conditions established, contact was established with these five parents, all of whom agreed to be a part of the task group.

The task group met for six weeks, discussing the empty nest transition, as experienced by each member, and as each member had observed in the lives of other missionary colleagues.

The following observations were made at the conclusion of the group:

All group members seemed to be grateful for the opportunity to be a part of the group. There was a sense that everyone was leaving with a greater knowledge of what, exactly, the empty nest experience entailed and what he or she could do to assist others who were going through that particular stage of life.

Discussion was devoted to the formation of a workshop to be held each year during Missionary Renewal. This workshop would be directed to families who are currently furloughing and will be leaving their children behind when returning to the field for their next missionary term.

By and large, there was a consensus that most of the work that would take place with empty nesters needed to occur on the field. It was there that the reality would be the most pronounced and the crisis would be fully realized, and it was there that prayer and moral support would be most valuable.

One of the group members plans to form a support group for empty nesters upon returning to the field, desiring to reach out to those who are going through this phase as well as offering preventive counsel to those who are preparing to go through it.

Another member reported having already begun to incorporate that which had been gleaned through the group experience into the interaction with other missionaries

with whom this member works. This member's spouse confirmed that they had already begun to utilize what they had learned in their interaction with missionary families in their region of the world.

## CHAPTER 5

### A RESOURCE PROPOSAL FOR MISSIONARY EMPTY NESTERS

It is clear that missionary couples going through the empty nest experience often feel ill prepared. Everyday life for missionaries is often all-consuming, and adequate preparations for life transitions such as the empty nest often go undone. Case two, mentioned in chapter four, exemplified a couple that was proactive in preparing for the empty nest. Paula spent time reading and interacting with others. The payoff was not a pain-free transition, but rather a purposeful one that resulted in an enriched marriage and increased ministerial satisfaction when the initial mourning process was complete.

This author believes that intentionality is a key factor in ministry to missionary families, the empty nest experience being no exception. A clear conclusion reached by the task group was that any intentional ministry to empty nesters would need to be twofold, consisting of preparatory training for both leaders and future empty nesters as well as on-field ministry for those experiencing the empty nest.

The challenge for this author has been to develop a training program that will be comprehensive enough to be helpful without being time prohibitive. The following pages will describe both projected resources and training outlines, one of which has now been utilized.

#### **Preparatory Training**

##### **Leadership Training**

Assemblies of God World Missions (AGWM) has approximately thirty area directors serving throughout the world. This staff comprises the on-ground leadership that addresses the day-to-day issues of missionaries serving in their respective regions. Area directors will meet with their colleagues serving in the same region of the world approximately three times a year. There is also an annual world area director meeting that takes place prior to Missionary Renewal.

Area directors are seen as operating in a pastoral role on the field and, of necessity, deal with personnel matters of all kinds. Naturally, some area directors see themselves in a more pastoral role than others and consequently address spiritual and emotional needs of the missionaries serving in their part of the world with more intentionality. Having served as an area director for more than eleven years, this author realizes that the pressure of offering pastoral support, coupled with the administrative responsibilities that accompany the ministries of forty or more families on the field, can sometimes be overwhelming.

Prior to the World Area Director meeting of 2010, the author was asked to develop a twenty- to thirty-minute presentation on the empty nest experience for missionary couples. Although the presentation was brief and basic, it addressed the challenge of the empty nest for missionary couples and offered suggestions for ministry to those couples.

The presentation began by clarifying that while missionary families seem to invest mightily in an effort to prepare their children for college, they are not prepared for what life will be like for them when their children are gone. The fallout on the field can be characterized by depression, increased anxiety, increased marital conflict, relational

problems with other missionaries and members of the host national church, frustration with work, interruption of ministry, and attrition. The task group, described in chapter four, reported this fallout.

An explanation was given as to why the relational aspect of the empty nest is so important, addressing the fact that missionary parents frequently have been overly invested into the lives of their children in an effort to compensate for the absence of the extended family on the field. For that reason, the empty nest, when fully realized, can signal a serious relational crisis for the parents as a couple. Since children often serve as insulators in a marriage, there are preparations that have to be made for the future—steps that can be taken in order to begin to make a healthier transition.

A transition was then made to suggestions for married couples approaching or experiencing the empty nest. Those suggestions included taking steps to get to know one another again, accentuating the romantic side of their relationship, taking time together to set new goals for the future, and making prayer time together more meaningful. A bit more attention will be given to this later, within the context of area director (pastoral) training.

Mention was made of the importance of healthy grief processing accompanied by the acknowledgement of the end of a chapter of family life and the beginning of a new one. This experience is more pronounced within the context of the missionary family that is separated by thousands of miles. Attention was also given to the relevance of one's own extended family background and attachments and the influence this has on the empty nest experience.

Discussion was devoted to the importance of empty nesters being able to share their thoughts and feelings within a safe context composed of others either experiencing or having experienced the empty nest.

Finally, it was acknowledged that, for many missionary couples, the empty nest is characterized by a profound period of introspection, which frequently opens the door to a change in ministry emphasis or a career change. Understanding this part of the phenomenon results in an underscoring of the importance of offering career and occupational counseling to empty nesters who are furloughing and attending Missionary Renewal.

### **Missionary Renewal Workshop**

The following is a description of a more in-depth workshop that would be offered during the annual Missionary Renewal event. It would be a recommended activity for all parents who will be sending their youngest or only child to college during their next term of missionary service. A detailed outline of the workshop has been included with this project (Appendix B).

**Rationale.** The following is a direct quote from the rationale that this author would use if presenting the workshop:

Professionals who work with families facing challenges agree that transitions are the ultimate tests of family systems. One of the most trying times for the missionary couple is the period of time that precedes, includes, and immediately follows the onset of the empty nest. Given the absence of an extended family during most of the time that missionaries serve on the field, an unusual closeness may develop within the immediate family unit, exacerbating the pain of the

separation that takes place when the missionary children leave for college. During the eleven-year period that I served as area director for AGWM (Assemblies of God World Missions) in Mexico, it was my observation that, of the missionary couples who resigned their appointment as foreign missionaries and returned to the United States or maintained their appointment while transferring to a U.S.-based assignment, excluding those who were forced to transfer because of health issues, 60 percent were approaching or in the middle of the empty nest period. Although the research seems to find that missionaries do a good job preparing their children for college life, they tend not to prepare themselves as well as they should. (Frey, 2010, p. 1)

**Preparing missionary kids to leave for college.** The workshop begins with a section dedicated to preparing missionary kids for college. The author must admit that the real purpose of this segment is to help parents feel more at ease, allowing them to concentrate on themselves for the remainder of the workshop. Although it has been the observation of this author that missionary kids are, by and large, more than adequately prepared for college, parents still seem to be overly anxious with respect to sending their children away. The purpose of this first brief segment of the workshop is to alleviate some of this anxiety.

Issues addressed within the first part of Section I include basic information related to scholarship, health insurance, and disciplinary issues (what happens if a missionary kid is suspended or expelled from college).

The next part of Section I deals with spiritual and emotional support for missionary kids. Names of capable counselors (counselors who have experience in

counseling with third-culture kids) and a compilation of information concerning local congregations in the cities where the missionary kids will be attending college will be offered. The missionary kid support office, having determined where many of the missionary kids will be enrolling in college, will have gathered this information in anticipation of the event.

A “what to expect” mini session will take place, which will incorporate the help of young adult missionary kids who will recount some of their experiences during the first few months of college. These students and former students will make themselves available to answer any questions the missionary parents or children may have.

**Focusing on the couple and their relationship.** The following can serve as an introduction to this section:

Frequently missionary parents have been overly invested into the lives of their children in an effort to compensate for the absence of the extended family on the field. For that reason, the empty nest, when fully realized, can signal a serious relational crisis for the parents as a couple. This part of the workshop will address the marriage. Since children often serve as insulators in a marriage, there are preparations that have to be made for the future—steps that can be taken in order to begin to make a healthier transition.

Four points (Coleman, 1994) would be emphasized during this part of the workshop:

***Let love be seen and heard.*** For years, sacrificial love has been directed toward the children with the mate sometimes being neglected. It is important to be intentional about expressing love at this point. Examples of love demonstration would include gift



giving, nights out, accentuating the positive side of being alone in the house, and creating opportunities for activities together.

**Create healing.** Considering all that parents have been through, once the nest is empty is a good time to take a break and concentrate on healing—helping heal one another and healing together. Communication will be key. For the last couple of decades the children have served as insulators for many couples. They have not communicated as they should. Now that there are no children at home, any communication problems that existed before will be greatly amplified. A variety of tools can be used to both access and enhance the communication skills for the couple.

**Get to know one another again.** People change. Raising children changes all couples, who consequently are not the same people who said, “I do” prior to the children coming along. It is important to get to know the person one’s spouse has become.

**Set goals for the future.** These can be tangible goals, small and large, such as a long-needed vacation to a place one has always dreamed of visiting, establishing a retirement fund, continuing education, or moving into another house. There should also be emotional and spiritual goals—goals to develop in areas that the couple recognizes as weak areas in their marriage as well as the areas of strength upon which they can build in the future.

**Final section: Planning ahead.** Couples would be encouraged to divide into small groups during this session. During this part of the workshop, attention will be given to three primary areas.

**Grief.** According to Bowlby’s theory of attachment (1980) the way that parents have related to the principal caregivers in their own lives will directly affect the way that

they form attachments and consequently handle the empty nest experience with their own children. Knowledge of this will offer an element of understanding to missionary parents facing the empty nest experience.

***Career adjustment.*** One of the central tasks of middle adulthood is to be proud of accomplishments of self and one's spouse. It is at the onset of the empty nest that missionaries frequently begin to take a close look at their professional lives and question whether they want to continue doing what they have done until that point. This may be for a variety of reasons: a lack of possibility for advancement, lack of productivity, a sensed lack of emotional support, changing interests, and a sense that one's presence is no longer needed are all factors to be considered.

***Utilization of tools.*** Tools will be used to help missionaries determine what the best course of action would be for their future, if the couple express an interest in changing ministries. A career counselor will also be available for this part of the workshop.

### **On-Field Resourcing**

Aside from a short workshop that is offered to area directors during the summer session of Missionary Renewal, a more in-depth seminar will take place that will more thoroughly equip these leaders to minister effectively to missionary couples experiencing the empty nest. Should area directors decide they would like to designate a missionary colleague as a mentoring figure in this process, the training will be offered to that person, as well. For that reason, rather than referring specifically to the area director, throughout the remainder of this section, the term "caregiver" will be utilized. Recommendations

will be made that the caregiver be someone who has experienced the empty nest while serving in foreign missions.

Three processes will be emphasized in this training: emotional, relational, and spiritual. Although the three greatly overlap, for the sake of organization they will be addressed separately.

### **Emotional Processes**

Although the caregiver will not necessarily be someone with formal training in professional counseling, a basic knowledge of certain emotional processes common to the empty nest experience will be needed. The following will be addressed:

**Grief.** Basic knowledge of the grief process, as experienced in any significant loss or transition, is imperative. The five elements of the grief process originally listed in the Kübler-Ross (1969) model are denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance. The caregiver should be conscious of these factors. He or she can lead the missionary couple in understanding the concept of grief marking the “death” of a phase of life. Again, normalizing the elements of the grief process can be a liberating experience for the couple that is experiencing the empty nest crisis.

Not all missionary couples will accept the idea that they are grieving, but they will acknowledge an emotional upheaval in their lives due to the absence of the children from their home. In those cases, for the sake of simplicity, this author would prefer to utilize the Transition Curve, developed by Adams, Hayes, and Hopson (1977). The curve is divided into the reactive phase and the proactive phase. It illustrates the declining of self-worth from the beginning of the transition until the beginning of the proactive phase,

a period of time that can be quite significant. Although Grosshauser (2002) references the work of Adams, Hayes, and Hopson, primarily with respect to culture shock, this author believes it to be a valuable resource for a simplified understanding of the grief process experienced by missionary couples entering the empty nest period. The ability to normalize the feelings that the missionary couple experiences, without causing them to become stuck in the reactive phase, will pave the way for a healthier transition. Unfortunately, many missionary couples suffer in silence and shame, believing that the severity of their experience is unique to them.

The caregiver should take care not to attempt to impose his or her own grieving style on the couple that is receiving ministry. The severity of the emotions felt and displayed will differ, according to personality types, family background, and culture. This author had the opportunity to observe several missionary couples experiencing the empty nest and noted that there was a marked difference in the way that those from an Italian-American background grieved the absence of their children.

**Self-worth.** Self-worth, as noted by Adams, Hayes, and Hopson (1977), begins to decline at the onset of the transition (reactive phase) and begins to normalize as one enters the proactive phase. When applying this to missionary couples entering the empty nest, this author has observed that it is not unusual for a missionary parent, due to perceived failure or lack of cultural adaptation, to glean his or her self-worth vicariously, through the children. Frequently, missionary children far surpass their parents in language skills and cultural adaptation. Additionally, a missionary child may excel in a particular sport or academic activity, diverting attention away from the parents' lack of fulfillment and temporarily providing a buffering sense of achievement. When a

missionary couple who has, to a degree, lived life on the field vicariously through their children, enter the empty nest period, the impact on their self-worth may be even more severe, and the transition to the proactive phase much more difficult. In these situations, the caregiver can be an invaluable source of encouragement. Notwithstanding, the couple described above might very well benefit from occupational counseling. It is quite likely that their lack of adjustment and productivity is due, at least in part, to a bad ministry fit. The empty nest experience might very well serve as a catalyst, causing the couple to reexamine their current missionary role and look to another role or place that would be a better fit for them. They are now free to make that decision without disrupting the lives of children in school. This, also, can be a liberating experience for the couple.

**Mattering.** Schlossberg, Waters, and Goodman (1995) define mattering as “the need to be appreciated, noticed, and acknowledged” and make the following observation concerning empty nesters and the sense of mattering:

What has been called the empty nest syndrome is an example of a loss of mattering. Some people—men and women alike—feel they are no longer important after their children leave home. Others view the emptying of the nest as a transition to a potentially exciting new stage of life. (p. 129)

Never should an attempt be made to minimize the powerful emotional process that is taking place in the lives of the missionary couple throughout the empty nest experience. Phrases such as “This too shall pass” should be avoided, and husband and wife should be encouraged to own the process while drawing upon available resources that will enable them to transition forward.

Caregivers should recognize their own limitations in this process, understanding their role to be one of support and friendship, not replacing professional counseling, if it is needed. Knowing when to back away and refer a couple to an able therapist or psychologist is crucial.

### **Relational Processes**

The empty nest experience can represent, for many missionary couples, a disruption of the primary relationships in their lives. The way in which they have related to their children will certainly change, but, aside from that, they may experience a change in other relationships. The following section will briefly examine four relational groups and the effect the empty nest experience might have on these relationships and, in turn, the influence these same relationships might have on those experiencing the empty nest.

**Relationship with children.** Aside from the physical absence of the child from the family home, the empty nest signals a new way of relating to the one's children. The fleshing out of this relationship is far from a science and is very dependent on the temperament of the young adult. While some missionary kids relish their independence and are slow to make an effort to communicate with their parents on the field, others are highly dependent on their parents and prefer to communicate on a regular basis.

Caregivers can assist missionary couples in the day-to-day adjustment to being apart from their children, assuming the couple is open to that help. That involvement may be as simple as listening to the empty nesters describe the loneliness or "lack of energy" in their house, without judging or attempting to offer a quick fix.

In an ideal situation, the caregiver can become a sounding board for the empty nesting missionaries, allowing them the opportunity to vent their frustrations with their

children who, frequently, are going through significant adjustments to life in the U.S. As opportunity arises, the caregiver can reassure the parents that their children are not unique in the issues that they are facing. This author found that missionary empty nesters appreciated the moments of transparency during which he was able to describe some of the deep waters he had walked through with his own children.

**Spousal relationships.** Caregivers should be acquainted with the basic material offered in the area director training and the Missionary Renewal workshop, described in the previous section of this chapter. Since the caregiving relationship should begin several months to a year prior to the scheduled departure of the last child, the preventative measures should be incorporated into that dynamic. These include encouraging the couple in demonstrating love, creating healing, getting to know one another again, and setting goals together.

Caregivers should give particular attention to the emotional distance between wife and husband. Again, if issues develop, the caregiver should not attempt to operate as a marriage counselor but should be willing and ready to facilitate in getting the couple the help they need.

The spouses should be made aware of opportunities that they will be able to take advantage of that were not possibilities before the children left home. Sometimes, due to the force of habit, couples will neglect opportunities that now await them simply because they are still in a childrearing mode (denial). Caregivers can intentionally facilitate new opportunities for ministry and recreation for the couple, purposefully challenging them to try new ventures.

Spouses should be encouraged to grow through the empty nest experience *together*. Both husband and wife may be challenged to the core of their being by their new reality. The emotional pain that accompanies the grieving process can cause one or both spouses to become extremely vulnerable. It is important that this vulnerability be shared together. A denominational leader shared with this author how, after he and his wife returned from seeing their youngest child off to college, they got back into bed and began to weep and hold one another.

Unfortunately, during this critical phase, some missionary couples have the tendency to grow apart and form other unhealthy relationships that can prove harmful or destructive to the marriage. Couples that are not willing to communicate unwittingly open themselves to the danger of extramarital affairs. Caregivers can gently coach couples in a positive direction of communicating with one another.

**Relationships with colleagues.** In chapter four, the case studies reported little to no detected negative change in relationships with colleagues. Relationships with those from the host culture were enhanced, for the most part due to the ability of the parents to invest more time into those relationships.

This author has observed that relationships with missionary colleagues can be affected more than the empty nesters realize. Due to the fact that the missionary couple that has begun the empty nest experience is not conscious of the severity of what they are experiencing, anger, frustration, and confusion can be displaced in a number of directions. One of the safest directions might be a missionary colleague. For that reason, the caregiver should be careful to take note of the missionary couple's relationships with other missionaries on the field. If he or she observes that there is a noticeable negative



effect on these relationships, the couple should be made conscious of that. They may be oblivious to it, due to their own pain.

The empty nest experience can present the perfect opportunity for the missionary couple to form new relationships with colleagues and to strengthen old ones. While they did not have the time to invest into those relationships while their children were in the home, they can now enjoy those relationships to the fullest.

**A supportive social network.** For the missionary, the old adage, “You cannot choose your family,” can be expanded to “You cannot choose your family or those with whom you work.” It is important to address the need for missionary couples to have a supportive social network composed of people who can both nurture and speak into the lives of the couple. Missionary colleagues on the field may not be a natural relational fit, so the social network has to come from other sources.

Schlossberg et al. (1995) speak of the importance of this social network:

As we listen to adults in transition talk about their relationships, support is often an integral part of the discussion. Indeed, providing emotional and instrumental support may be considered at least a partial measure of what constitutes a close relationship . . . . Social supports can be a major buffer enabling adults to cope with stressful situations. It can be provided by intimate relationships, family members, networks of friends, or by institutions. A paradox of support systems is that at the very time they may be most needed, during major transitions such as divorce, widowhood, or a long-distance move, they may be most in jeopardy. (p. 132)

The caregiver should encourage the missionary couple to give attention to the social support system that has been formed over the years. Intimate friendships, close family members, and pastoral figures can serve to enable the couple to walk through the empty nest experience in a healthier fashion. Although, as mentioned in the preceding pages, it is important that the couple give attention to their own interpersonal communication, isolation will normally prove to be counterproductive to healthy processing of the empty nest experience.

### **Spiritual Processes**

As in any other transition, the empty nest experience tests the strength of the family. It is during this time that many missionary couples find their faith to be severely tested. Questions such as why a loving God would choose to separate one's family may haunt the minds of the most committed servants.

Caregivers are given a special opportunity to provide spiritual nurturing for missionary couples whose faith is being tested. It is, therefore, important that caregivers have a healthy understanding and theology of the family. Having a firm grasp on the fact that family is covenant enables one to both maneuver and guide others through deep waters during critical transitions.

The importance of the caregiver's prayer support for the missionary couple going through the empty nest transition cannot be overstated. The spiritual bonding that takes place during times of prayer can provide a strong bridge, allowing the couple to make a healthy transition from the reactive phase to the proactive phase.

Often caregivers will be called upon to lead by example, as they struggle with the challenges within their own families. They should be careful, during these moments, not

to give in to discouragement and disillusionment and question their own ability to mentor others when their own family is in pain. Rather, they must realize that the perfect family does not exist and that the human condition reflects this fallen world. Finally, an understanding of the “already and not yet” as applied to the context of the missionary family, with its unique challenges and perspective, will enable the caregiver to both understand the reality of the transitioning missionary couple while conveying to them a message of hope.

## APPENDIX A

### INFORMED CONSENT DOCUMENT

Project Title: **Missionary Couples and the Empty Nest Experience**  
Principal Investigator: **Floyd L. (Butch) Frey**

#### **PURPOSE**

This is a research study. The purpose of this research study is to determine the impact that the empty nest transition has on missionary families, especially the parents. Results of this study will enable Assemblies of God World Missions (AGWM) to more effectively minister to missionary families who are experiencing this transition. The purpose of this consent form is to give you the information you will need to help you decide whether to be in the study or not. You may ask any questions about the research, what you will be asked to do, the possible risks and benefits, your rights as a volunteer, and anything else about the research or this form that is not clear.

We are inviting you to participate in this research study because you either currently going through the transition in question, or have gone through it.

#### **PROCEDURES**

If you agree to participate, your involvement will last for approximately two months.

The following procedures are involved in this study.

- A. Examination of the missionary's background (based on both observational and written material.
- B. Completion of a questionnaire.
- C. Personal interview(s)

#### **RISKS**

There is an inherent risk that comes from disclosing information that could be deemed by others to be "negative." Procedures incorporated to address this risk are outlined in the "Confidentiality" section of this document.

#### **BENEFITS**

Although there will be no personal benefit for you, in participating in this research, it is the hope of this researcher that, in the future, missionaries may benefit from resources that will be invested into providing care during the transition period in question.

#### **COMPENSATION**

You will not be compensated for participating in this research project.

#### **CONFIDENTIALITY**

Records of participation in this research project will be kept confidential to the extent permitted by law. Any documents pertaining to this research will be kept in a secure location,

in much the same manner as counseling notes. Information will be stored and secured, through encryption, on a computer/hard drive. Only this author will have access to the information. In the event of any report or publication from this study, your identity will not be disclosed. Results will be reported in a summarized manner in such a way that you cannot be identified. This will include the use of pseudo names, changing geographic locations, and other identifiable data, not crucial to the research.

### **VOLUNTARY PARTICIPATION**

Taking part in this research study is voluntary. You may choose not to take part at all. If you agree to participate in this study, you may stop participating at any time. If you decide not to take part, or if you stop participating at any time, your decision will not result in any penalty or loss of benefits to which you may otherwise be entitled. In that event, any data collected will be deleted from the digital storage being used.

### **QUESTIONS**

Questions are encouraged. If you have any questions about this research project, please contact: Floyd (Butch) Frey at 417.343.3957. E-mail: butchfrey@gmail.com If you have questions about your rights as a participant, please contact the Chair of the Institutional Review Board, Dr. Maria L. Boccia, at: 704-940-5835.

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Your signature indicates that this research study has been explained to you, that your questions have been answered, and that you agree to take part in this study. You will receive a copy of this form.

Participant's Name (printed):

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\_\_\_\_\_  
(Signature of Participant)

\_\_\_\_\_  
(Date)

### **RESEARCHER STATEMENT**

I have discussed the above points with the participant. It is my opinion that the participant understands the risks, benefits, and procedures involved with participation in this research study.

\_\_\_\_\_  
(Signature of Researcher)

\_\_\_\_\_  
(Date)

## APPENDIX B

### QUESTIONNAIRE FOR MISSIONARY EMPTY NESTERS

Recognizing that, for missionaries, the initial weeks and months of the empty nest period is one of the most difficult life phases, please take time to provide thoughtful, honest answers to the following questions. Feel free to type your answers, save all changes, and return as an attachment.

1. Would you describe your family as "close-knit?"
2. How would you describe your relationship with your child (children) prior to them leaving for college?
3. Please explain, what factors were considered in answering question 2?
4. Would you consider communication between you and your child (children) to have been open?
5. Do you think that you received adequate support and guidance from the mission office prior to your child (children) leaving home?
6. Please describe any formal "forms of recognition" that took place, recognizing this change of status for your child (children). An example would be a going away event, dedication service, etc.
7. If applicable, please describe the effect (positive or negative) the above event(s) had on you.
8. Please place an "X" beside any of the following that best describe your emotions during the weeks immediately following the departure of your child (children).
  - a. Ambivalence
  - b. Anger
  - c. Anxiety
  - d. Confusion
  - e. Emotionally Dead
  - f. Excitement
  - g. Fear
  - h. Frustration
  - i. Guilt
  - j. Joy
  - k. Liberated
  - l. Misunderstood
  - m. Neglected
  - n. Peace
  - o. Profound Sadness
  - p. Regret
  - q. Relief

- r. Resentment
  - s. Shame
  - t. Spiritually Energized
  - u. Spiritually Weak
9. How would you describe the impact this transition had on your marriage? For example, did it seem to strengthen your commitment to your spouse? Did it serve to draw you closer together or did you find yourselves communicating less effectively than before?
  10. Would you consider that your ministry became more productive after your child (children) left home? Less productive? Unchanged?
  11. How would you describe relationships with missionary colleagues as being affected by your transition?
  12. Were relationships with coworkers within the national church affected? If so, how?
  13. Please utilize the space below to record any other aspects of your empty nest experience that you consider pertinent, not limited to, but including any health problems that became evident during the empty nest transition.
  14. If you were given a "wish list" in which you could express ways in which AGWM could additionally help with this transition, what would be the first three "wishes" you would include?
    - a.
    - b.
    - c.

## APPENDIX C

### OUTLINE FOR EMPTY NEST WORKSHOP

Rationale (story of leaving Andrea at Evangel): I believe it was Murray Bowen who said that transitions are the ultimate tests of family systems. One of the most trying times for the missionary couple is the period of time that precedes, entails, and immediately follows the onset of the empty nest. Given the absence of an extended family during most of the time that missionaries serve, an unusual closeness may develop within the immediate family unit, exacerbating the pain of the separation that takes place when the missionary children leave for college. During the eleven-year period that I served as area director for AGWM (Assemblies of God World Missions) in Mexico, it was my observation that, of the missionary couples who resigned their appointment as foreign missionaries and returned to the United States or maintained their appointment while transferring to a U.S.-based assignment, excluding those who were forced to transfer because of health issues, 60 percent were those who were approaching or in the middle of the empty nest period.

Although the research seems to find that missionaries do a good job of preparing their children for college life, they tend not to prepare themselves as well as they should.

The empty nesters' workshop will take place during the annual missionary renewal time when furloughing missionaries gather for a time of workshops, worship times, and informative forums. The content of the workshop will be based on the input received from a focal group that will meet early this spring.

#### I. Preparing the MKs.



At the risk of this category being classified as tokenistic, I'll admit that the real purpose of this segment is to help parents feel more at ease. Ironically, in a study conducted (Jennifer Huff), MKs were determined to have been prepared more adequately for independence by their parents than were non-MKs. Even so, as MKs are leaving home, there is always something that comes up that clouds the picture, and the purpose of this first brief segment of the workshop is to use a shotgun approach that will, I hope, alleviate some of the anxiety while allowing the parents to concentrate on what this child's departure from the home will mean for them personally.

- a. Nuts and bolts (having to do with the pragmatics of life at a U.S. college).
  - i. Scholarship information
  - ii. What if I get sick or hurt? (basics of using IMG insurance, names of missionary support families in the area, etc.)
  - iii. What if I get in trouble? (missionary family whose son was suspended)
- b. Spiritual and emotional support
  - i. Names of capable counselors (frequently the college counselors will have little experience dealing with third-culture kids)
  - ii. Compilation of information concerning local congregations in the city where the MK will be studying. A brief description of the places of worship should include the mission and emphasis of the church, approximate average age, etc. (Frequently MKs become discouraged when they cannot find a local congregation where they feel at home.) This information will be compiled by the MK office, having determined where many of the MKs will be enrolling into college.
  - iii. "What to Expect" session will take place, which will incorporate the help of young adult MKs who will recount some of their own experiences during the first few months of college and be there to answer questions that the younger MKs may have.
  - iv. Acquaintance with the tools of the MK support office

## II. Focusing on the couple and their relationship.

- a. Frequently missionary parents have been overly invested into the lives of their children in an effort to compensate for the absence of the extended family on the field. For that reason, the empty nest, when fully realized, can signal a relational crisis for the parents as a couple. This part of the workshop would address the marriage. Since children often serve as insulators in a marriage, there are preparations that have to be made for the future—steps that can be taken in order to begin to make a healthier transition. Coleman suggests four things:
  - i. Let our love be seen (and heard). For years, sacrificial love has been directed toward the children with the mate sometimes being neglected. It's important to be intentional about expressing the love at this point.
    1. Gift giving
    2. Nights out
    3. Accentuating the positive side of being alone in the house
    4. Creating opportunities to be together
  - ii. Create healing: Considering all that parents have been through, once the nest is empty is a good time to take a break and concentrate on healing—helping heal one another and healing together.
    1. Communication will be key. For the last couple of decades the children have served as insulators for many couples. They have not communicated as they should. Now that there are no children at home, any communication problems that existed before will be greatly amplified. A variety of tools can be used to both access and enhance the communication skills for the couple.
  - iii. Get to know one another again. People change. Raising children changes all of us, and we aren't the same people who said "I do" prior to the children coming along. It's important to get to know one another again.
  - iv. Set goals for the future. These can be tangible goals, small and large, such as a long-needed vacation to a place you've always dreamed of going to, establishing a retirement fund, continuing education, or moving into another house. There should also be emotional and spiritual goals—goals to develop in areas where we acknowledge we have been weak as a couple.
  - v. If a joint prayer and devotional life has been somewhat neglected, reconstruct it.

- III. Working with the parents separately (separate women from men). During this final stage of the course, wives and husbands will be in separate workshop areas. The workshop will address the following areas:
  - a. Grief

- i. Bowlby's theory of attachment would cause us to come to the logical conclusion that "parents' mental representations of their own attachment relationships impact the way in which they react, behaviorally and emotionally, to separation events." (*Child Development*, January/February 2001)
- b. Career adjusting. One of the central tasks of middle adulthood is to be proud of accomplishments of self and one's spouse. It's at the onset of the empty nest that missionaries frequently begin to take a close look at their professional lives and question whether they want to continue doing what they have done until that point. This may be for a variety of reasons:
  - i. Lack of possibilities for career advancement
  - ii. Lack of productivity
  - iii. Sensed lack of emotional support
  - iv. Presence is no longer necessary
  - v. Change of interests
- c. Tools will be used to help missionaries determine what the best course of action would be for their future, if they express an interest in changing ministries. A career counselor will also be available for this part of the workshop.

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